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The Year of Change

We're finally into 2013 and the one thing that everyone is certain about—whether its comics or games—is that this is the year of change. Maybe that's partly due to the Chinese zodiac, which designates 2013 as the year of the Snake—solid or otherwise, a sign that's particularly noted for business. That definitely has relevance to this year, in which the businesses that compose both comics and games are both trying out something a little different.

The first cannon has already been fired this year, with Sony surprising everyone by beating Microsoft to the punch with a console announcement. This is a real turn-around from the past few years when it seemed like Sony just sat back and shook its head, trying to recover from whatever shocking upset Microsoft had just inflicted for the year. Of course, Microsoft isn't going to take this sitting down, so everyone is expecting that the boys bunkered down in Redmond are probably calling up Elijah Wood even as I write this and asking MTV, "So, you got a couple of free hours of broadcast time you're not doing anything with?" It's quite likely that by the end of this holiday season the next generation won't be "next" anymore.

Things are also switching up in the world of comics. Marvel is making claims to put more an emphasis on their female heroines. This is something they've already tried—and failed—to do in the past, so whether this effort will finally stick is something everyone is wondering about. And speaking of heroines, DC's put out a compilation of the New 52 Batgirl which is, of course, Barbara Gordon, out of the wheelchair and hopping rooftops of once again. I've always had a soft spot for Babs, particularly after Allan Moore's nasty turn with her in *The Killing Joke*, so it's nice to see her back in action and in the capable hands of Gail Simone.

This issue also marks some of those big changes I was talking about earlier. For one thing, we've finally got a decent JRPG that's worth checking out for all the fans, provided you have a PS3. *Ni no Kuni* is a return of the Good Ol' Days of the genre, and that's very welcome return to form. There's *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* which is the change that no one saw coming; the MGS world going into the 3rd person, brawler/action genre, with Platinum Games at the helm. We've also got our hands on the final release of *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, the game that every *Aliens* fan has been waiting with bated breath for. After all, *Aliens* was one of the most iconic science fiction/action movies of the 80s, and the gaming industry itself has been using the Space Marine as a role model for so long that it's become almost an unwelcome cliché. At least Gearbox has an excuse, since their game features the original mold from which all others follow.

Wayne Santos
Senior Content Editor

In this issue Tim Takes a look at the new BlackBerry, and speaks to videogame music legend Tommy Tallarico

Will he shelf his PlayStation 2 permanently? Reid speaks about the death of the PS2 in this issue.

Has box art taken a nose dive in quality? Brittany examines how box art impacts the final product

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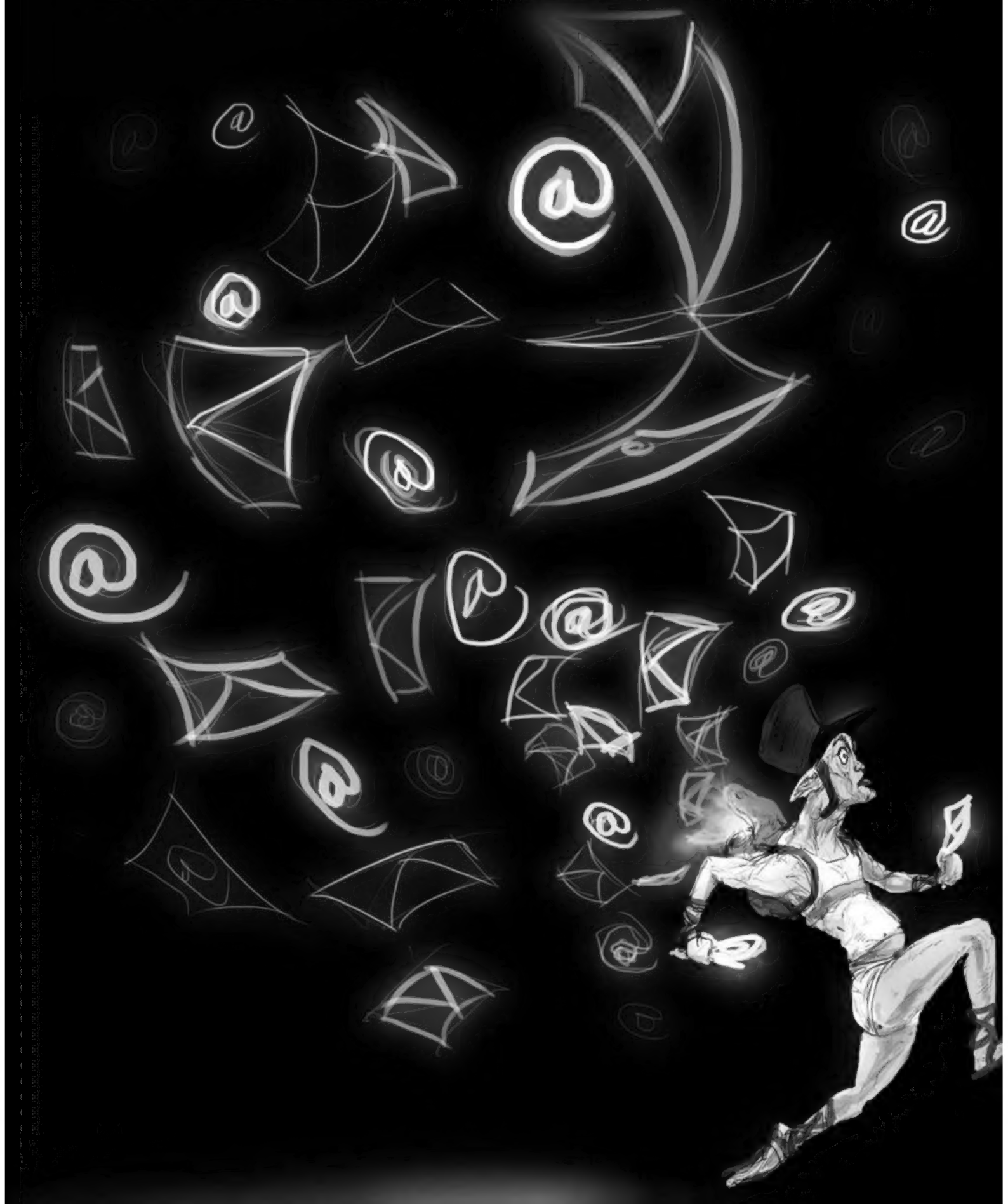

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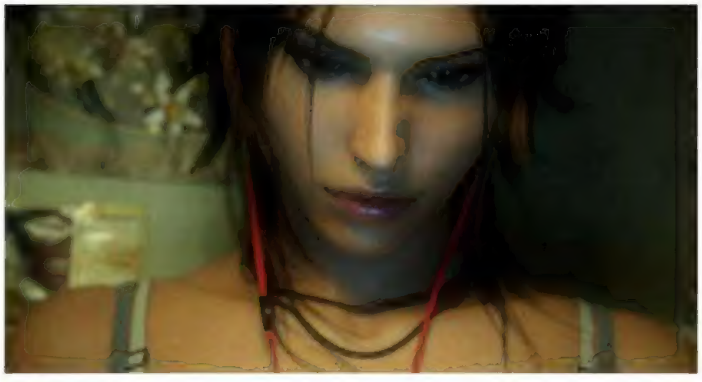

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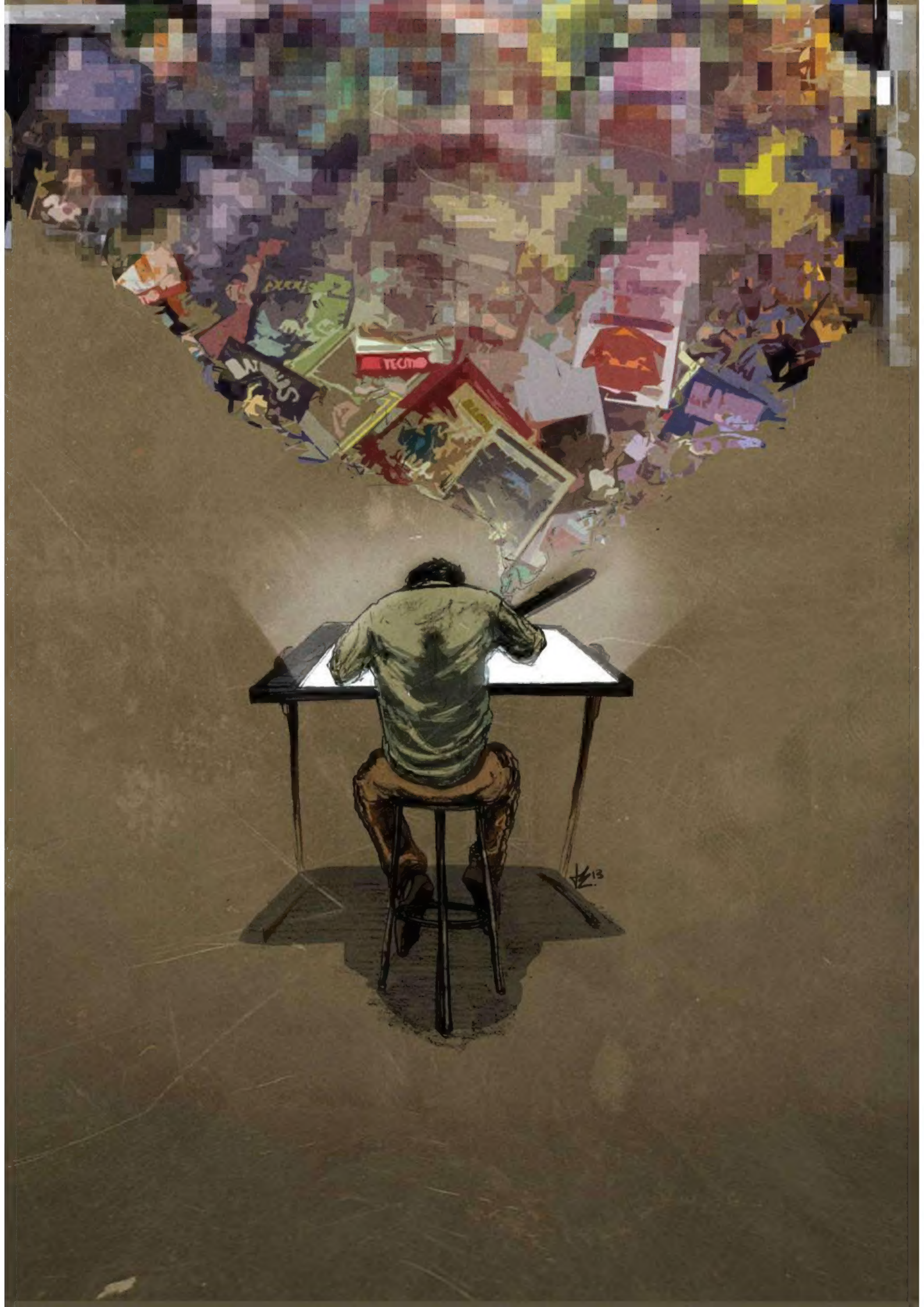

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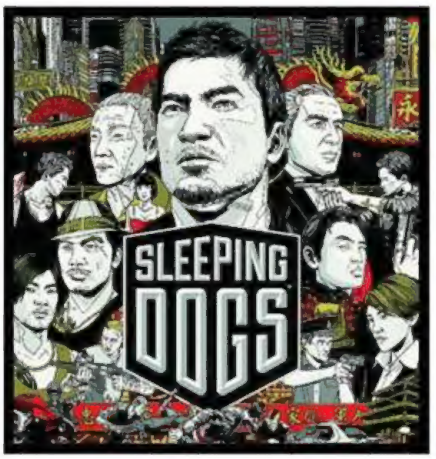
Drawing to a Close

The Extinction of Brilliant Box Art

Words by Brittany Vincent



You wouldn't judge a book by its cover. Why would you judge a videogame by its box art? Easy: the average consumer has little else to consider aside from a few bloated box quotes and embarrassingly nondescript packaging details devoid of any useful information. "Brilliant," raves the magazine who attended a review event. "Game-changing," touts an upstart independent gaming website who's just thrilled to have been chosen by PR to stand out as an authoritative voice among thousands of others. Little to no details about the impending experience adorn the casing.

And Then, Modern Videogame Box Art.

Its brilliant artwork is a stock image of a close-up character model adorned with a "Best of E3" ribbon. The male lead brandishes a menacing sidearm. Female supporting cast (or the rare heroine) looks hurt, vulnerable, or provocative. And this is just the Walmart exclusive edition. If you chose to shop with Amazon, you may get to proudly display a bland logo and lazy typography with an imaginative one-liner from the most influential voice in games journalism at the time. Beautiful, right?

Wrong. But it's the reality of gaming as physical copies and the collector-oriented mindset set out on an accelerated path toward extinction. There's an endangered species slowly dying a painful death that no one will ever stop to preserve: videogame covers. And in a few years, they'll probably have gotten even worse. The central focal point of a videogame, at least in the eyes of many collectors, is the art on its cover. Aside from an attractive spine, a masterful compilation of game imagery, symbolism, and attractive artwork is what can truly sell the complete package. While it's true across any media the quality of the content inside the box itself (on the disc, namely) should be considered more important than its packaging, there's a simple joy in appreciating the effort put into creating a quality piece that can be lauded not only for gameplay, but its aesthetic

There's an endangered species slowly dying a painful death that no one will ever stop to preserve: videogame covers. And in a few years, they'll probably have gotten even worse.

attributes as well. Even the long-running "games-as-art" argument should find this as important ammunition for the cause, as slovenly imagery doesn't exactly make a great case for that side.

It's a dying practice, however, with covers such as *Batman: Arkham City's Game of the Year edition* actually being greenlit for release. This is a cover whose bright red font proclaiming "10 out of 10" could trick uneducated, unknowing buyers into thinking that's the game's title. It's front and center, with a logo tucked away to the right. Granted, the audiences looking to purchase the game wouldn't be fooled, but the monochromatic image of Batman is assaulted with red review blurbs scattered about the cover and it could be difficult for consumers (parents, non-gamers) to discern if this is the product they're looking for or if it's even a *Batman* game at a quick glance. And before you laugh, this has actually happened in retail before somewhere. For the hardcore gamers and the collectors waiting for the best deal with the best set of content, this is what you're rewarded with. It's appalling to think that somewhere, someone found this an acceptable practice. What could have been a stunning display of medical-grade whites, the blood splattered across Batman's face, and the Dark Knight himself is reduced to what could be likened as a parody of the "Game of the Year" edition and the awards heaped upon games at the end of each calendar year.

God of War III sported a simple, uninspired close-up of Kratos, with his trademark sneer. Considering the previous *God of War* releases saw the Ghost of Sparta in the middle of various bits of carnage, it was a jarring change, and one that felt particularly slapdash: "Let's zoom in on Kratos for this one, guys - it'll really shake things up!" In a similar fashion, the *Resident Evil 6* cover was a simple numeral six plastered on a gradient blue and purple background - with an unfortunate shape of the six, to boot. While earlier releases (the *Metal Gear Solid* cover comes to mind) can make this acceptable, considering the clean white background and sharp red lettering across the cover, keeping in line with the rest of the series' excellent illustrations.

The lack of effort put into these games is in such stark contrast to the brilliance and minimalism of the original PlayStation 2's *Katamari Damacy*: clear skies, a gorgeous rainbow, and a couple cows going about their business as the horrific imagery of an enormous katamari rolls through the cityscape. Not only does it offer a glimpse of what you're going to be doing in-game, but it isn't cluttered with useless scores attempting to grab your attention or attempting to portray itself as anything other than what it is. The

vivid palette, relative peacefulness of the cows, and the chaos breaking out in the urban landscape works together to create a cover just as bizarre as the game itself. And it sold well enough to garner additional sequels in the West - without words of encouragement from reviewers or media outlets.

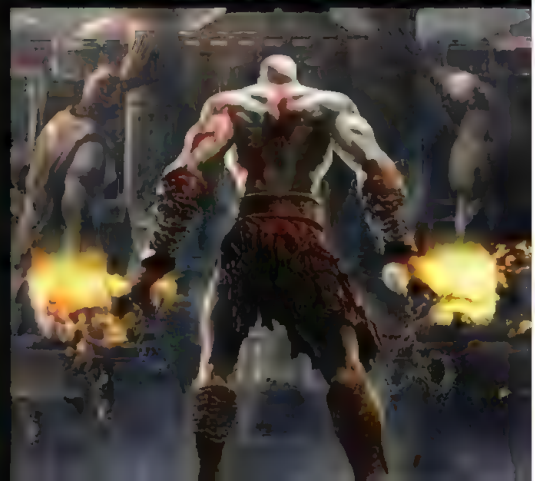
It's proof that sometimes developers and producers get things right. More recent examples include the Psycho appearing to blow his own "brains" out on the cover of the original *Borderlands* (and the dual-wielding Psycho of *Borderlands 2*), where in place of brains, blood, and pieces of skull are images of the various gangs and enemies of *Borderlands* zooming through Pandora, guns blazing. It's an image befitting of the knock-down, drag-out rumbles of the ramshackle world of mercenaries, and the bold, saffron title is intimidating and inviting. *Sleeping Dogs* bucked sandbox-styled trends by presenting its cast and features in a cartoony illustration style with muted greys, striking reds, and gold -- like the stereotypical Chinese decorations adorning many a locale in the country. It's a neat collage of the game's central players, and a clean look at the game's logo, showcasing elements of the game, what it's actually called, and setting up a distinct (if hackneyed) Asian flavour.

Recent controversy surrounding the final *BioShock Infinite* art emphasized the fact that the male protagonist posed with a sidearm in a generic manner just like the aforementioned blunders released prior to it. The criticism is divisive - one half is comprised of players who wouldn't be bothered by the *Batman: Arkham City GOTY* clamouring that the content of the game is all that's important, but they fail to realize they're furthering the issue and making it okay by continuing to support shoddy efforts such as these. The other half call the artwork "casual," but that's not exactly true - it seems as though the cover was meant to fall in line with the rest of the me-too shooters out there we've been seeing crop up over the years. Again, it comes down to attracting young, "hip" markets with a big gun and a (usually white) male protagonist. It's not only bland, it's so safe and pandering it's sickening. But perhaps that's what the market has come down to now.

Gaming is a much different beast than it was when we were growing up, and artwork such as what we saw in *Secret of Mana* or even *Chrono Trigger* is long gone, for the most part. And it's important to realize that audiences have changed as well. But there's no excuse for laziness when it comes to adorning the exterior of a product that could change hands, be displayed in a glass case, or lend itself to a youngster (or adult's) list of prized possessions. Videogames are upward of $60 in most cases, and there's no excuse for skimping on the details that should be a no-brainer to exert effort on. What will the future bring? It's uncertain if we'll even see boxes and cases as the years press on, but it's an unfortunate near certainty they will continue to decline in quality. CG

PlayStation 2

So Long PlayStation 2



The PlayStation 2 is finally, officially dead.

Words by Reid McCarter

The PlayStation 2 is finally, officially dead. Almost thirteen years after its November 2000 release (and seven years after the Xbox 360 kicked off the current console generation in 2005) Sony has ceased production of the system, pulling the plug on worldwide production as of January 2013.

For most of us the PS2 was an important system. Its massive catalogue encompassed a wide range of genres and served as the home for both by-the-numbers blockbusters and equally exciting experimental games. It seems only right to offer some sort of tribute to Sony's venerable black box as it's laid to rest by its creators. And so, here's a kind of obituary that looks back on my personal memories of the PlayStation 2 alongside a selection of five of the most impressive videogames created for it.

Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty, 2001

I desperately wanted a PlayStation One after playing through part of *Metal Gear Solid* on a rental machine. It was my reason for eventually getting the system. A few years later, poring over screenshots of the upcoming *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* in a PlayStation magazine, I decided I had to find a way to buy a PlayStation 2. I don't know exactly why Hideo Kojima's mad blend of spy and science fiction (*spi-fi?*) resonates with me the way it does, but at 15 years old the reasons behind its appeal didn't matter. I went out and got my first real job because I needed to buy a PS2 and a copy of *Metal Gear Solid 2*.

Without much of anything to list on a resume the best workplace I could find was a telemarketing office close to my high school. Describing the job as terrible seems overly kind. Throughout every evening and weekend day shift of phoning people around dinner time and hassling them to donate to a charity that seemed to switch descriptions every few hours while being yelled at by a team of money-hungry bosses, I kept my eye on the prize. When I had scrounged up enough for the PlayStation I quit the job. Walking out of that dismal office for the last time was a great feeling – working hard to earn the money for something I badly wanted to buy was even better.

Sons of Liberty was also brilliant of its own accord. The great protagonist switcheroo, when grizzled videogame icon Solid Snake is replaced by Raiden of the flowing blonde hair, offered players an honest surprise of the kind that would likely be impossible in today's industry. Lambasted as it is, the game's psychedelic conclusion also helped pave the way for the experimental weirdness that post-modern videogames would go on to use as a key storytelling tool (I believe *Spec Ops: The Line* and *BioShock* both owe a debt to *Metal Gear Solid 2*).

The game I bought a PlayStation 2 for was (and still is) excellent. It was also one of the first of a long line of many medium-defining titles developed for the system.

Grand Theft Auto III, 2001

A friend from school had bought a copy of *Grand Theft Auto III* over the weekend. On Monday he spoke about the game as if his TV had offered a brief glimpse into a wonderful new world. We huddled around him to listen to stories of this impossible videogame where anything was permitted – where the developers never said "no" to anything the player attempted. Looking back at it now, *Grand Theft Auto III* has plenty of faults (such as a frustrating difficulty curve and a story that leaned too heavily into its mob flick influences). Even in hindsight, though, DMA Design/Rockstar North's foray into the third dimension is a massive accomplishment.

GTAIII is a landmark in game design. It paved the way for imitators to try their hand at refining the burgeoning "sandbox" genre, weathered the media heat

that demonized videogames for trying to tell adult-oriented stories (even if its own narrative wasn't all that sophisticated), showed that a new generation of console technology could do much more than just offer prettier graphics and did all of this through the release of a title that was enthralling as both a progression-based solo campaign or a controller-passing mayhem simulator.

Before *GTAIII* I associated Rockstar with a handful of unexciting PC games featuring a perspective that made me feel a bit like throwing up when playing them. The PlayStation's inaugural *Grand Theft Auto* changed this for me by offering a better realized version of the crime franchise while offering the industry a look into the future at the same time.

Tony Hawk's Underground, 2003

Sure, *Tony Hawk's Underground* (THUG!) may not be many people's favourite entry to the venerable skateboarding series and, yeah, this game was also released on other consoles, but, to me, it's impossible to discuss the PS2 without mentioning the humble little DVD that spent the longest amount of time nestled into my system's disc drive than any other.

I borrowed a copy of *THUG* from a roommate in university sometime after frosh week in my first year at school and, away from home at last, played it alone or with friends over two semesters of new relationships, intellectual growth and the sudden stress of financial independence. The game was a study tool (between discussing notes for a sociology exam a classmate and I would replace the letters in HORSE with particularly difficult-to-remember terms), an inexhaustible drinking game (score attacks with an ounce of bourbon for the loser), a way to let off stress and a two-player accompaniment to any number of conversations.

THUG was a constant companion and diversion during one of the most formative years of my life. Its gameplay — maybe the apex of the *Tony Hawk* games' constant mechanical refinement — was as exciting for novices as it was for those who had spent hours perfecting their moves. This, alongside a fantastic character creator and wealth of modes, made it the most enduring PS2 game for me. Before Facebook was much of anything, when *Farmville* was just a glint in some cynical mathematician's eye, Neversoft made, perhaps, the ultimate social game in *Tony Hawk*.

I still have the DualShock controllers to prove it.

The death of the PlayStation 2 forces us to look back at how far games have come and where they might go in the future.

Shadow of the Colossus, 2005

Videogames, it turns out, can have all of the depth and mystery of a beautiful painting, the melancholy of a haunting song and the layers of meaning found in the best literary fiction. After a few years of playing nothing much aside from co-op *Halo 2* and *Virtua Tennis* on my housemate's Xbox I picked up a used copy of Team Ico's

Shadow of the Colossus and was immediately inspired to start caring about games again.

Shadow of the Colossus is a staggering game by any standard. Its visuals and sound design are outstanding, perfectly creating a world filled with the quiet reflection of exploring its geography and the grandiose action of combating gigantic creatures. Its story is complex enough to warrant player investment while being told with the minimalism and restraint necessary for multiple interpretations and careful criticism. And, of course, actually playing the game is a delight. *Shadow's* mixture of jump-and-climb exploration and puzzle-like "boss fights" are exceptionally well designed. The process of seeking out one of the colossi by galloping through a vast landscape, illuminated sword raised overhead, offers a protracted calm before the storm that is actually encountering one of the towering beasts in its natural habitat.

The game is, to me, the real triumph of the PlayStation 2 and is personally important as my primary reason for wanting to write about games in the first place. *Shadow of the Colossus* showed that videogames were not only a storytelling method, but that they also had the potential to become a new artistic medium in years to come.

God of War II, 2007

By 2007 I was busy with school and work and wasn't playing many videogames. During this time, though, PlayStation 2 games were still being released. I missed a lot from this era and so it wasn't until a few years ago that I actually had the chance to play *God of War II*.

I wasn't expecting much. I borrowed a friend's copy of the first *God of War* a while after its release and, like most people, was blown away by the fluid combat controls and the wonderfully presented Hydra boss fight. Just the same, a lot of years had passed since then and I wondered how well a late generation sequel to Sony Santa Monica's stab-em-up would stand against the advances in game design offered by more recent releases. Luckily, *God of War II* showed that, even after brand new consoles had launched, the PlayStation 2 was still a viable entertainment platform. The game is probably the best of the series, striking the right mixture of awe-inspiring action set pieces, logical puzzles and the Classics geek thrill of interacting with legendary Greek gods and heroes. It's a better paced, more consistently engaging experience than either its predecessor or sequel and likely represented the apex of the PS2's technical prowess (man did developers squeeze a lot out of that machine over the years).

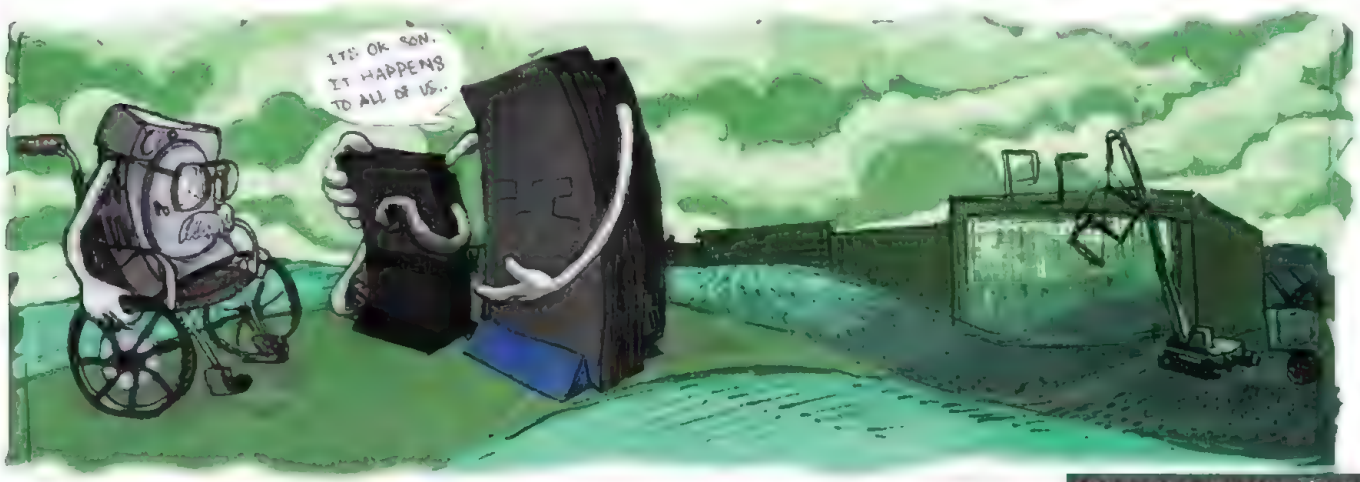
The success of *God of War II* also said a lot about the PlayStation 2's enduring popularity. Even as 2007 saw Microsoft's Xbox 360, Nintendo's Wii and Sony's own PlayStation 3 filling store shelves, the PS2 continued to thrive as a less expensive alternative to the "next generation." This would prove to be part of the system's legacy as well. Anyone with an interest in videogames and a modest budget for their hobby could access an enormous catalogue of excellent titles by picking up the "outdated" console and discount copies of anything that piqued their interest.

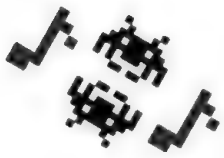
While *God of War II* may have been one of the last major PS2 releases, the extensive library of exceptional games available for the system demonstrated plenty of reasons for Sony to keep manufacturing the console into this year.

***

The death of the PlayStation 2 forces us to look back at how far games have come and where they might go in the future. In that sense, it's bittersweet. The medium has changed incredibly since Sony launched the system, both for better and worse. The PS2 represented a time before downloadable content, enormous release day patch downloads and online passes became an intrinsic part of game releases. The games that came out on the console were part of a simpler time, but were no less ambitious. The steps forward they took enhanced the medium and provided a blueprint that many developers are still taking cues from.

In might be easier just to say that the PlayStation 2 had a great run — far better than the many consoles released since videogames first made their way from the arcade to the living room. Sony, no matter what else they may do in the future, will always deserve credit for creating the system that is responsible for so many great experiences. New machines may have stopped being made, but that doesn't mean that the PS2 itself is any less important now that its life span has definitively ended. CG





Love What You Do and Do What You Love

Tommy Tallarico and Video Games Live

Words by Tim Ashdown

Confucius once said "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." In my years as a journalist I've never met a person who has exemplified this proverb or enjoyed his work more than Tommy Tallarico. The American born, Canadian raised composer/host/musician has over 250 games to his credit and many young Canadian gamers may remember Tallarico as Victor Lucas's hilarious yet curmudgeonly co-host on early episodes of *The Electric Playground* and *Reviews on the Run*. With his development and critiquing days long over, the past seven years have been spent spreading the magic of videogame music all over the world with his concert series Video Games Live (VGLive). VGLive really is a spectacle to behold. It's not just an auditory event, VGLive has evolved into an extravaganza featuring contests, comedy and of course playing videogames. The most recent tour took him and his show to more cities around the globe than ever before and next year he plans on adding more dates, including bringing VGLive to the Middle East for the first time. Recently I had the chance to speak with Tallarico about the concert's past, present, and future

Comics and Gaming Magazine: When you first started doing Video Games Live did you ever think that it would be this successful?

Tommy Tallarico: Yes, but I was naive. I actually started videogames live 10 years ago, but it took us three years to put on our first show at the Hollywood Bowl in 2005. Everyone thought we were crazy, no one believed that young people would come see a symphony, and people didn't believe that anyone would be interested in hearing music from videogames. So it really took us a long time. Even the game publishers, thought I was nuts. So it took a long time, two to three years to convince everybody to give us the rights and licenses. I even remember Square Enix saying, do you think people would come to hear *Final Fantasy* music being played? I really had to convince them that, yes people know who Nobuo Uematsu is and know what *Final Fantasy* music is in the states. But, I always thought it would be this big thing, even bigger then it is now. But again, I think I was being naive in terms of how much work it takes.

CGM: How do you keep the show fresh every year?

TT: Well for me, it's just new music, new segments and new technology. For example, with music there's so many new things that come out every year. This year we're doing recent games like *Skyrim* and *Journey* but there's also so much rich history, I mean we have 30 to 40 years of history to pull from. Even though I've created over 100 segments for Video Games Live over the years, we're still now just putting in new stuff from older games. We just put together a *Super Smash Bros.* interactive segment, where we get four people from the audience to battle it out while we play the music live. Things like *Earth Worm Jim*, a game I worked on 15 years ago, we finally just produced a segment for that. We have four or five different *Zelda* segments, we have four or five different Mario segments and we got to about 10 different *Warcraft* segments. So not only do we have all the new stuff coming out, but also all the older stuff as well. I'm currently working on a *Katamari Damacy* segment right now. Additionally every year technology changes and gets a little better. For example, some of the things we're doing this year is having the audience members actually use their phones and help control the show and interact with it in real time. Because it's interactive and videogames are interactive, we have excuses to use all these great things. It's challenging sometimes, but I think we pull it off.

CGM: Does that motivate you to keep pushing yourself and to top yourself?

TT: For sure. People always want to see certain things, but it's impossible to please everybody 100 per cent all the time. I'll give you a perfect example, with the song "One Winged Angel" from *Final Fantasy*. If we don't play it, half the audience will flip out and say, "Oh my God how can you put on a videogame show and not play something from *Final Fantasy VII*." If we do play it then half the audience will go "Geez we've been coming to this show for seven years and every time it's the same damn *Final Fantasy* tune, why don't you play something else?" That's the challenge, so what do you do? Well this year I took it out, so too bad. But we put in a couple other *Final Fantasy* pieces that are new, we just started doing Aerith's theme. Which was voted into the classical music hall of fame over in the UK, and put it as number 16 of all time, that's up there with Beethoven and Mozart. So we said, this is a good year to do this. It's always a challenge to please everyone and you just have to come terms with the fact that you're not going to please everybody. I think keeping maybe four or five songs from the previous year that people love, like *Castlevania*, *Chrono Trigger* and *Chrono Cross*, *Street Fighter* and *Still Alive*, those are songs people love to hear and sing or clap along with. So we'll keep a few of the favourites and bring in something totally new.

CGM: Where do you see Video Games Live heading?

TT: I see it like Cirque Du Soleil really. In that each year we're going to come out with a new show and a new experience and keep touring it and building the

brand. There will always be a well to draw from for new content. Whenever we go to Brazil we play to five to six thousand people a night, but just last week we played Chile for the first time, and sold out, there were four thousand people there. Next year we're already making plans for Chile, but we're going to some other places in South America such as Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, and Columbia. We still haven't been to Scandinavia yet, and hitting that in the spring. We also haven't been to Australia yet. When you go to a new country you have to convince everyone all over again from day one, it's like starting out again seven years ago. You have to say, no really people will go to this see this. Luckily for me I have trailers and numbers now to back it up, so it's not just an idea. But it is a foreign concept to a lot of concert promoters and symphonies still to this day. Five years down the road I think that we'll have played every country in the world. We have been touring for seven years, but this year we had our first show ever in Dubai. That's going to be the first ever videogame concert ever in the Middle East. The year after we're going to hit Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and we're talking about doing shows all over India, so there's always new countries and places to take it. My goal five years from now is to hit every single country. By 10 years, it would be to grow every single one of those markets, we can't do them all every year so we would do them every two to three years and come back with a whole new show.

CGM: Do you find that there's a universal language to videogame music?

TT: For sure. I wouldn't call the scores ambient though. No matter where we go in the world *Mario*, *Final Fantasy*, *Zelda* and *Warcraft* are pretty much popular everywhere. Everyone loves the classics *Castlevania*, *Tetris*, *Street Fighter*, are again popular everywhere we go in the world. With certain countries, like down in South America and Dubai there's not as much Xbox stuff, so something like *Halo* might not be as popular in Argentina, than it is in the U.S. or Canada. *Warcraft* is huge in China, but in a few countries over in Japan PC gaming isn't that big, so it's not that popular there. So you have to create a set list based on the country.

CGM: What is it that each member of the audience comes away with?

TT: For non-gamers, the reason I created Video Games Live is I wanted to prove to the world how culturally significant and artistic videogames have become. So for all the non-gamers in the audience I hope they come away with more appreciation for the art of videogames, that's my main goal. For the gamers, I want them to walk away with the feeling of pride. Because games sometimes get a bad rap for being too violent, or for wasting your time, or for just being a bunch of geeks and nerds, and as we know that's not the case. So I want there to be pride and a feeling of nostalgia. There's no better feeling then coming away from Video Games Live and thinking "Hey I remember what it was like the first time I played that game with my dad when I was seven years old."

CGM: Is there anyone you haven't worked with that you want to?

TT: No. I've literally worked with everybody. From a composition stand point and through Videogames Live, I've worked with Nobuo Uematsu to Koji Kondo and everybody in between. Whether it's Yasunori Mitsuda from the *Chrono* series or Russell Brower from Blizzard, Jason Hayes, or Martin O'Donnell with *Halo* the list just goes on and on. There's a fantastic extra movie bonus on our DVD and Blu-Ray where I go to Japan and the composers threw me a party, and we filmed the whole thing. So I went through the crowd talking to the all the people. People like Yuzo Koshiro who did *Streets Of Rage*, *ActRaiser* and *Shenmue* and the *Sonic the Hedgehog* guys, all the Namco people, or Kow Otani the guy who did *Shadow of the Colossus*, or the woman who did *Street Fighter* and *Kingdom Hearts*. It really is a cavalcade of Japanese stars, and I don't say that lightly, it took 23 years to build that up. So I don't really think there's anyone at all, even the new awesome composers like Austin Wintory who did the music to *Journey*. Even someone like Garry Schyman, who's relatively three or four years new to the industry who does stuff like *BioShock*. We've worked with them all, I can't think of anyone who I haven't contacted or been a part of the show.

CGM: Do you ever miss working on game audio and composing?

TT: Yeah, but I did it for 22 years and worked on over 300 games. With what I'm doing with Video Games Live, I'm still so involved with music, whether it's arranging someone else's music, or going over scores, charts, choir parts, arranging and orchestrating. Game development is a whole different beast, but to be honest, I have more fun doing this, rather than working in a studio all by myself, having to deal with tons of producers, tight deadline and no budget. With this I get to perform the greatest music for thousands of people every night all over the world, and get that instant feedback and adrenaline rush, it's second to none. This is what I've dreamed about doing my entire life, my two greatest loves growing up were videogames and music. I use to put on little videogame concert shows when I was 10 years old for my friends. I would record all my favourite game music on a cassette tape, and play it back when I jumped up in front the TV set with my favourite videogame playing and I would then play a guitar along with the recorded track for my friends. CG

Like being able to tear your enemies limb from limb? It's a privilege, not a right, and if gamers aren't more considerate about public concerns, it could be taken away.

For The Greater Good

Words by Seán O'Sullivan

One of the unfortunate consequences of reading about your hobby of choice from enthusiast outlets is that despite the many opinions flying around, you're rarely exposed to ideas outside of the echo chamber. An obvious example of this can be seen whenever figures in the mainstream media blame videogames for instigating violent acts in their floundering attempts to answer that incessant 'why' that grips so many in the aftermath of unthinkable tragedy. When outside groups start lobbing accusations at this $60 billion dollar industry, readers and press alike rally together to dispel any uncomfortable notions that are being put forward.

Studies that find links between violent games and aggressive behaviour are systematically undermined, their methodology questioned, sponsoring bodies accused of bias, and the conclusions generally dismissed as tosh masquerading as science. Meanwhile, studies that conclude that no statistically relevant correlation can be established are trotted out uncritically, as if the results were inscribed on tablets of divine origin.

The last time hysteria flared up around violent videogames, it ultimately resulted in the ESRB; a way for the industry to self-regulate, provide parental advice, and later provide a scaffolding on which to enact policies to limit the sale of mature games to minors. It was a wise concession that shored up the PR issues surrounding the industry, and it just seems like common sense to raise awareness about violent or sexual content in videogames to keep impressionable minds from being exposed.

It's difficult to be truly intellectually honest when most of what you learn about the effects of gaming comes through the prism from which most gamers receive their news. It's a self serving bias; if you believe that your hobby could be warping minds, it's hard to indulge in a few hours of gleeful escapism after a long day in the mines. That you have no anecdotal evidence to support the theory that videogames can do harm doesn't mean that there's no credence to the theory, and I'd bet good money that few gamers have seriously considered any of the charges put forward.

So dear reader, join me on an uncomfortable thought experiment. What if undeniable, water-tight evidence was presented proving that videogames do have a detrimental effect on certain subsets of the population? How much of your personal liberty would you be willing to sacrifice for the greater good? It's a question that's not quite worth considering in earnest because that time isn't likely to come soon, but I'm hoping that a harrowing look at the worst-case scenario will prompt less complacency on the part of gamers.

What's At Stake?

Before I continue, I should establish that I am not a kook. You'd be hard pressed to find a more stalwart apologist for violent content in games (on this side of sociopathy at least). I'm the guy who thought that *Modern Warfare 2's* gunplay was a step down from *World At War,* since the inability to dismember your enemies made the enemies feel plasticky. I like great big meaty

gibs, I think blood splatter provides more effective feedback than a cross over your reticule, and I laud *Max Payne 3's* horrific depiction of puckered, bullet-ridden corpses, because bullet-ridden corpses should be horrific.

Back to our dystopian future - let's say that irrefutable proof makes the question not "what effects do games have on people," but "what can we do to limit the harmful effects?" If a copy of *Grand Theft Auto IV* was found to be responsible for triggering a killing spree in just one of the 25 million people who bought and played it, how do we balance the scales when we have millions of hours of entertainment on one side, and lost lives on the other?

I grew up in Europe, where governments aren't quite as squeamish about meddling with everyday life as American and Canadian leaders, so I've seen how quickly artistic freedom can be swatted down by well-meaning, out of touch politicians. Looking across the pond is never going to yield a clean comparison due to myriad cultural factors, but nonetheless, it serves up some illustrative real-world examples of what can happen when the industry is at the mercy of bureaucrats.

In the UK, the rating system is enforced by law, meaning that it's illegal for kids to buy mature games at retail, but judging from the amount of online games I've been welcomed into by a choir of prepubescent British twerps hurling epithets they scarcely understand, parents can be a shoddy line of defence. If some public official wanted to ameliorate concerns, the next logical step would be to categorize violent games as a controlled substance, behooving parents to keep them locked up with their booze and cigarettes, lest they be charged with negligence.

Equally likely would be the imposition of censorship in the games themselves. There are concerns about specific acts, such as violence against authority figures having a warping effect on a child's mind. Could you imagine an environment where evasion, not brutality, was the only way to defeat the cops in every videogame? Or a mandate that any violent acts must be depicted as self-defence within the narrative of the game?

Europeans have been (grudgingly) putting up with censorship in games for years, but typically in titles that pushed the envelope or courted controversy. The original release of *Carmageddon* in the UK had to replace the human pedestrians with green-blooded zombies to make it to the shelves, but the German version went further and added oil-filled (non-humanoid) robots. In Germany, the *Grand Theft Auto* games have had an often baffling amount of censorship. The female player-avatars were cut in *GTA 1*, and from *GTA 3* onwards, not only were blood and decapitation effects removed, but so were the most violent missions. NPCs don't drop bundles of cash when killed, and curiously, it's still possible to start a fist-fight with a passerby, but once they're knocked down, the player must wait for them to get up before striking then again; enforcing a bizarre decorum to the sociopathic behaviour.

...It's time to start paying a little more attention to what's going on outside the bubble. The entire gaming community needs to be a little more sympathetic to the fears of those who are unacquainted with videogames

Controlling The Dialogue

If the political climate surrounding games really does heat up, the games industry still has a few ways to self-regulate to keep legislators from sniffing around. The current generation of consoles has a pretty good suite of opt-in parental-control options, which not enough parents are aware of or have the technical proficiency to use effectively. This could easily be shifted to an opt-out option, maybe even leveraging an encrypted flash-drive or an NFC tsotchke to grant adult privileges without messing around with passwords or other hindrances.

This may seem an innocuous and progressive endeavour for a company to start, but I'd bet the farm that a sizable community would rally to boycott a hardware vendor with the temerity to inconvenience their customers. I've yet to find any gaming communities that exude a sense of civic responsibility - more often than not it's a case of shoddy rhetoric blaming parents and wanting to change the subject when uncomfortable topics arise. For this reason, Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft won't risk the backlash by blazing a trail, so such an initiative would have to be enforced with each of the major players in lockstep.

Ultimately, if you want to live in a sanitized world that outlaws *Sleeping Dogs'* slapstick environmental kills, eliminates *Saints Row's* cartoonish minigames, or denies gamers the satisfaction of watching zombie corpses pile up in *Left 4 Dead*, it's time to start paying a little more attention to what's going on outside the bubble. The entire gaming community needs to be a little more sympathetic to the fears of those who are unacquainted with videogames, and much more savvy in discussions about what can be done to allay these concerns. There's still a lot that can be done, and if we don't get proactive about steering the conversation, it will go into territory that's outright inhospitable to artistic expression. C&G

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POW!

Going to Camp

An Interview with Ty Templeton

Words by Nicole Rodrigues

Ty Templeton is a busy guy. Between drawing, writing and editing comics for Marvel and DC, he regularly teaches Comic Book Bootcamp classes, hosts fantastic events like the 24 Hour Comic Challenge and still somehow has time to update his blog with hilarious Bun Toons. Based in Toronto, Canada, Ty's credits are impressive: several Batman titles — *The Batman Adventures* (which he won the "Outstanding Writer" Joe Shuster Award for in 2005), *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* and *The Batman and Robin Adventures* to name a few — *Simpsons Comics, The Ren & Stimpy Show, Superboy,* his current run on *Marvel Universe: Ultimate Spider-Man* and many more. Add *Bigg Time* to that list, Ty's original series about an aspiring actor and his near sadistic guardian angel, and you get a glimpse of the variety of his career. Ty took some time out of his busy schedule to chat with us about his current projects, how the industry has changed since he first started out drawing comics and what he'll be working on in 2013.

The Bun Toons is the last place where I get to communicate with an audience directly, without "help" from folks who feel I need their help.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: *Bun Toons* is approaching its three year anniversary. Congrats! What inspired its creation? How has it changed since the first strip?

Ty Templeton: Originally, the strip (and the blog itself) was started because I wanted a place to create without an editor over my shoulder. My first experience in the world of comics was self publishing, and I greatly missed the idea of creating without having to make it a) commercial b) someone else's idea of what works or what doesn't.

Nowadays, I'm so busy I don't have time to do the mid-week comedy column (as I was doing for the first year or so). Those columns were quite popular as well, and a few of them were reprinted for a fee at some larger websites, such as IO9, and whenever they were reprinted, the website editor altered a word or two, or edited out a joke or so, and that convinced me never to let that happen again. I make a decent enough living writing and drawing Spider-Man, or whatever, that I'd rather not let anyone else tell me what's funny or what's acceptable to joke about.

The *Bun Toons* is the last place where I get to communicate with an audience directly, without "help" from folks who feel I need their help.

CGM: How long have you been teaching comic book workshops?

TT: That's been going on about five or six years. I started at an art college here in Toronto, and after a year or so, after being approached after a convention by a student at that school who told me he learned more from hanging around me for the day at a convention than he had all year at that school. After about a year I was running the "comic book department" at the art school, but, I found I had a boss who insisted I teach things to the students that I felt were wasting their time, and wouldn't let me teach things that were absolutely essential. So I left that college and started up my own one-room-schoolhouse about four years ago. One of the things that drove me nuts was being told I had to teach the comic book students children's book illustration, because the owner of the school kept telling me there were no jobs in the comic biz, and we had to at least prepare them for work. She had a real dislike of the comic book students and it was clear she had no understanding of the business whatsoever, nor any interest in actually preparing them for comic book work. It took me months to convince that school to teach the students anatomy without a model. I'm not sure I ever completely convinced them, as I believe they stopped teaching that as soon as I left.

CGM: What has it been like running Comic Book Boot Camp for over three years? What is your favourite class to teach?

TT: My favourite class to teach is the one called "Bootcamp" because it covers all the subjects: scripting, layout, anatomy, pencilling. I also teach individual classes in all of those subjects, as well as inking, character development, hands and faces, and I even teach a mini-course on how to write comedy. The Bootcamp course is fun because I get to run through every subject, and give the students tons of information they can use. Once I had a student who took the course just for the writing part, and told me at the beginning of the course that he had no interest in learning to draw. I asked him just to participate in the drawing exercises when they came up, and see what happens. At the end of the eight weeks, he shook my hand and told me I taught him to draw

"Against his will." That was my favourite moment that year.

CGM: You recently hosted a 24 Hour Comic Challenge for the first time. How did it go? What was it like to create with so many other artists? Will we see its return in 2014?

TT: The 24 Hour Comic Challenge was a huge success. We had 34 participants and about 10 or so of them made the whole 24 hours and finished their full book. We weren't creating together, so much as creating in the same room, most folks creating on their own, though we did have a few writer/artist teams.

Because of health reasons (I'd been in a hospital just a few days before) I was told by my doctor that I wasn't allowed to stay awake the full 24 hours as my body wasn't up to the stress, but my wife Keiren (who did all the hard work organizing the event in the first place) stayed for 18 of the 24 hours, and only napped a very little bit.

On my website, I put links to about 10 of the finished issues, and they're all amazing. Such a diverse set of aesthetics and talent. Just delightful. We're going to do at least two a year, and probably another two 12 Hour challenges in between.

CGM: You've been in the comic industry for over, well, let's say a while now. What sort of changes have you noticed since you first started? Do you think it's a better industry overall for artists and creators?

TT: Hmmm... is it a better industry for artists and creators? Yes and no. First, our incomes aren't as high as they used to be because very few of us get royalties like we did back in the 90s. Comics sell about a third (or less) of what they did twenty years ago, and that means there's less money flying around for us creators to scoop up. However, there's a lot more places for creators to create, which means there's more opportunities. If you're any good at this biz, you won't be out of work long if you have a good list of editors to call.

Starting rates are lower nowadays as well (adjusted for inflation), which means everyone is constantly competing with kids willing to work for half what Marvel or DC pays me. That can be difficult sometimes. Especially when we're competing with creators from South America, where the cost of living is much lower and folks can survive on lower rates. I pity the creators who live in places like New York City... a monthly book only barely pays the rent for a New York apartment in 2013.

CGM: What books will you be working on in 2013?

TT: So far, I'm still slaving away at *Marvel Adventures: Ultimate Spider-Man*, drawing an issue as we speak. (I took a break from drawing page seven of issue #12 to answer this email for instance). That's my gig for the next couple of months at least. I have an iron or two in the fire for something coming up at DC, but it's still very, very early to discuss that. And of course, there's the annual *Holmes Incorporated* issue that the students at my school produce each year. That usually starts up in March, and finishes in the summer.

I just did a quickie couple of pages for an upcoming issue of MAD Magazine, and just finished a fun little *Avengers* related thing that I can't talk about until it's ready to go. And I think I have a story in the latest issue of *Heroes of the North* that came out a couple of weeks ago.

CGM: Anything else you'd like to add?

TT: I'm always happy to push the school. We had full enrolment for this session, but there's always another course coming up every eight weeks, so the more the word gets out, the more seats we fill.

I'm too focused on what has to be drawn this week to know what's coming up next month, I'm sorry. But, I will take a moment to promote my wife's colouring work. She's one of the principle colourists for *Heroes of the North*, as well as some other wonderful indie gigs she does. She's been colouring a few of my Spidey covers lately, so she's getting a Marvel credit or two. That's nice for her, she's really good at it. It's an odd experience, since I first taught her to colour a couple of years ago, and she's fast becoming better at it than I ever was. If she has time, I ask her to colour the *Bun Toons* on Saturdays, and you can always tell because those are the ones that look really nice in colour. The ones I colour I do in an hour, and they look like it. CG

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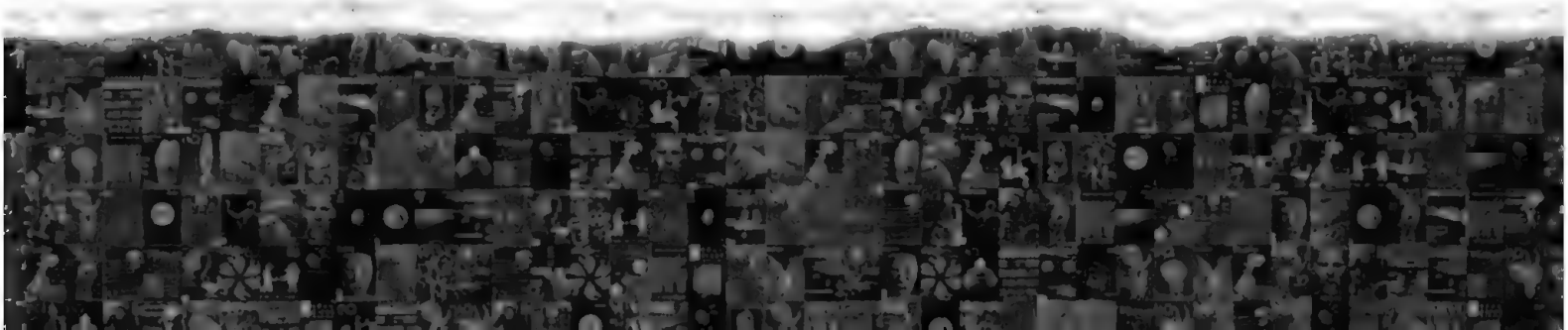

RAIDING IN 2013

THE MANY FACES OF LARA CROFT

WORDS BY WAYNE SANTOS

It's hard to believe that Lara Croft is almost 20 years old. The most widely recognized female character in gaming first got her start back in 1996 with the original *Tomb Raider* and now, 17 years later, the wheel has come full circle with another game titled, simply, *Tomb Raider*. In the changes from one decade to next, and one console to the next, Lara hasn't remained stagnant. There have been a lot of changes for the character, although the ones being made in the latest game are the biggest ones yet, rebooting the entirety of her past to present a wholly new Lara that bears little in common with her predecessors other than the requisite raiding of tombs. But perhaps the best way to understand how far Lara has come, we should look back at where she began. That's why we're going to hop back a few decades to see the Lara of the past, the better to understand her new future.

Lara Pumps Up The Jam

The 90s were a stormy decade for gaming. In the span of a few short years, gaming jumped from the cartoony graphics of a typical *Mario* game to the "realistic" renderings of *Mortal Kombat*. It's also thanks to *Mortal Kombat* and its FMV contemporary *Night Trap* that violence in games first came to the attention of the media, and thus the long, sordid relationship between 'murder simulation' and videogames began. But it was also in this decade that we got the first real, consistent, female character in gaming history. Yes, Samus Aran was already running around in *Metroid*, but she didn't burst into the public eye the way Toby Gard's creation did.

Gard, initially wanting to make an interactive equivalent of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, went the conventional route in the beginning. His early concept involved a male character but there were fears from the publisher, Eidos Interactive, that this would bear too much similarity to the original Harrison Ford inspiration. In response to this, Toby Gard turned the character into a female, but switched things up by making her strong, capable and only incidentally physically attractive. Her real strengths were her athleticism, traversal skills and ability to dual wield pistols in a fight. Thus Lara Croft, a titled lady of landed wealth, came into the world, using her considerable fortunes to fund her expeditions into long lost tombs to search for artifacts. A star was born. Of course, both the cultural sensibilities and the technical prowess of consoles were very different from what they are now in the teens of the 21st century. Political correctness was only starting to really get a stranglehold on mainstream culture, and 3D, polygonal graphics had only just come to the fore with consoles like the Saturn and PlayStation.

This was a simpler Lara, who seemed to travel the world and raid tombs solely for reasons of adventure. Cut scenes hadn't yet reached the cinematic heights we take for granted today, and so Lara's exploits—especially the real-time, in-game cut scenes—were far more modest in showing off who she really was. Her proper British accent was in place even in these early games, but all anyone really knew or understood about Lara Croft was that she was rich, and she plundered ancient tombs for artifacts, killing a lot of animals and people in the process. Every year for the next five years, Lara Croft appeared—almost *Call of Duty*-like—in a new annual release that used the same engine.

It was during this time that an entire cast of characters were introduced, from her morally ambiguous mentor Werner Von Croy to rival relic hunters like Pierre DuPont. But Lara's essential character—or lack thereof—remained the same throughout these years. She was rich, she raided tombs, she killed things and that was about as far as her depth of personality went.

Then the next console generation came along and things changed. For the worse.

The Darker, Angsty Lara

In 2003, *Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness* debuted on the PlayStation 2. Continuity-wise, this still took place in the same world as previous games, but there was a concentrated shift in focus on Lara as a character. The game failed to make the same commercial impact as games of the previous generation. That was mostly because of the flawed design decisions, but it was partly because of the new take on Lara Croft. Despite being created for the 21st century, Lara was a relic of 90s, Image Comic-inspired characterization; kohl-lined eyes, dark, broody and angry, but with no convincing motivation to be any of these things. She was dark n' gritty for its own sake, and this didn't resonate well with fans who had grown accustomed to an intelligent, sophisticated adventurer who seemed to enjoy what she was doing.

It was *The Angel of Darkness* that put Lara Croft and the *Tomb Raider* franchise into a hiatus that would last years. The lack of innovation from the annual releases of 1996 through to 2000 had eroded the mega-hit sales of the property. Core went back to the drawing board and three years later, the end result was something that failed as a game, an update of the character, and even a decent graphical presentation of Lara Croft for the sixth generation of consoles. The failure of that game resulted in *Tomb Raider* being taken away from its original developers, its original creator, Toby Gard, having left Core years earlier as the commercial interests of the publisher proved incompatible with his own creative aspirations for Lara Croft. He thought gamers wanted a strong character, whereas Eidos believed they wanted a sex symbol. In the short term, Eidos was right. In the long term, this Lara Croft nearly buried the franchise.

The Recovery

In 2006, Lara Croft made a much more cautious, tentative return to the PS2 and Xbox. She was now under the care of the American studio Crystal Dynamics, who had formerly handled projects such as the dark, vampire RPG *Legacy of Kain*, and the more lighthearted funny animal platformer, *Gex*. They did something very obvious with Lara Croft; they went back to her roots. Toby Gard returned to become the steward of Lara's return under new management. This time, no one stopped him from creating the character he had always envisioned. *Tomb Raider: Legend* was a "soft" reboot of the series, keeping Lara's character unchanged, but adding

more depth to it, and slightly rewriting her past. Possibly the most interesting thing about this change is that she now had a past that was more than just an excuse to do a flash back level.

Lara's story now became one of loss. It was revealed that she lost her mother when she was nine years old during a horrific plane crash, a change from her previous history when the plane crash occurred at the age of 21. Both Lara and her mother survived the crash, but a brush with an ancient artifacts resulted in the apparent death of Lara's mother, and forced Lara herself to survive alone and unaided in the wilds of the Himalayan mountain range until she could get herself back to civilization. When it is revealed later in her adult life that artifacts similar to one she lost her mother to were scattered all over the planet, Lara undertook a crusade to find out what really happened. The end result was the usual raiding of tombs players had become accustomed to, but with a greater emotional connection to Lara than had ever existed before. She was still rich, and she still raided tombs, but now, as with Batman, the motivations behind her actions stemmed from witnessing the loss of one parent, her mother, and then enduring the later loss of her father, who was never able to accept that loss himself and used archaeology as a refuge to explore the possibility that she wasn't lost for all time.

This sudden infusion of emotion, motivation and character development worked wonders for the franchise. Of course, the fact that Crystal Dynamics also crafted a game that was an order of magnitude improved over *The Angel of Darkness* didn't hurt either. The game was so successful that both Crystal Dynamics and Toby Gard returned for an encore with *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, a "re-imagining" of the original game that brought that first Atlantean adventure inline with the new Lara Croft's personal history. It even went so far as to tie in the original villainess, Jaqueline Natla into the fate of both of Lara Croft's parents.

This closure was something that occurred in the first game of the current generation, *Tomb Raider: Underworld*. Here, it became clear that *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, *Tomb Raider: Legend* and the latest game were a loose trilogy of sorts, with a constant cast of characters, ongoing storyline and Keeley Hawes acting as voice actress for the duration of these games. The end result was the first consistent treatment of Lara Croft's world and character, an act likely to never be repeated as the franchise moves into a new phase of life.

The New Lara Croft

With newest game simply titled *Tomb Raider*, Crystal Dynamics says goodbye to both Toby Gard as a storyteller for the series, and Keeley Hawes as the voice of Lara Croft. There is a different approach being taken this time, one that follows the same route as Christopher Nolan with his take on *Batman*. This isn't just a reboot, this is a return to the beginning, a new origin story, something the previous franchise never fully explored. Crystal Dynamics is now interested in the pivotal events that would shape a young Lara Croft into the wealthy, globetrotting archaeologist the world is already familiar with.

This new game takes place entirely during the life of a younger, untrained Lara Croft. In this incarnation, her parents have both disappeared, leaving her with the expected vast fortune that comes with being a titled Lady of British high society. Interestingly however, this Lara Croft rejects her fortune, seeing the acceptance of the wealth as an admission of her parents' death. Instead she chooses to put herself through school, eschewing Oxford or Cambridge for the less prestigious University College London, working jobs, living on her own rather than at Croft Manor, and eventually signing up for a trip on a vessel named the Endurance, bound for Japan and searching for treasure.

The important thing here, with the new writer Rhianna Pratchett's take on Lara Croft is the stripping away of all the things that have become synonymous with the series. This Lara doesn't have an ear piece wired to tech and historical support in some far away mansion. She doesn't dual wield pistols, at this point in her life, she's never even killed anything. As with Nolan's *Batman Begins*, this darker, more realistic approach to Lara Croft will put players front and centre for all the pivotal events that will eventually shape Lara into adventurer most people are familiar with.

Crystal Dynamics are taking a lot of risks both character and mechanics-wise with this latest instalment in the franchise. It's going to be interesting to see whether these choices are the right ones for the second decade of the 21st century, or whether this new Lara has failed to keep up with the times. CG

COMPUTERIZED ARTS
RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

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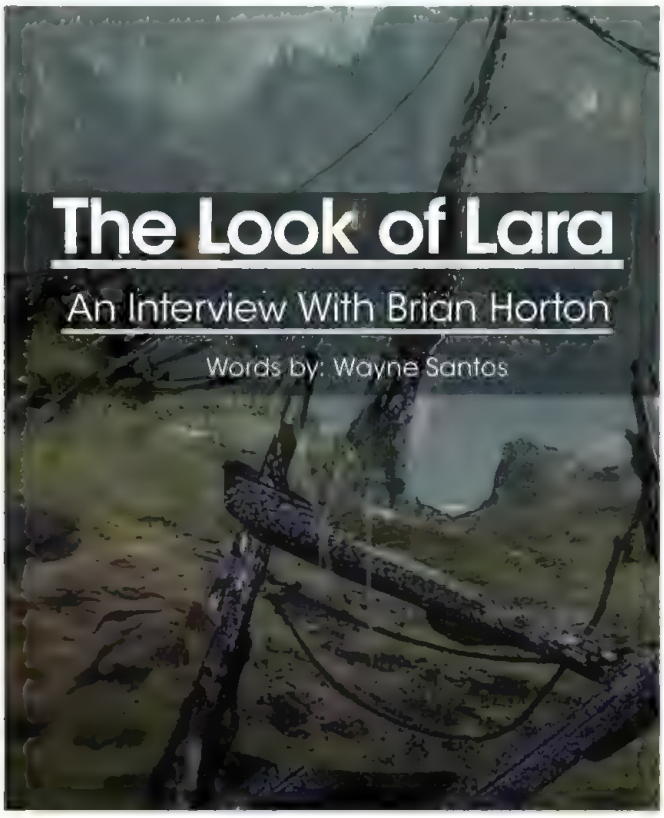
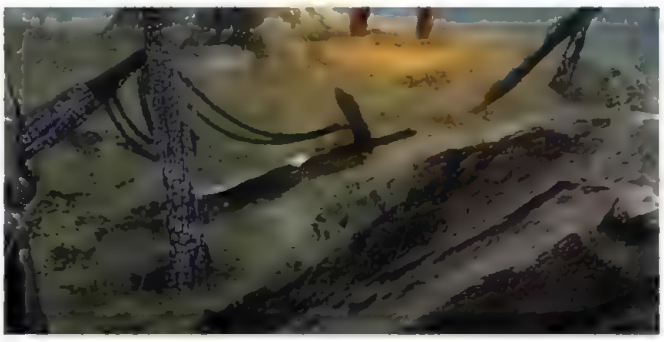


The Look of Lara

An Interview With Brian Horton

Words by: Wayne Santos



When we look back at Lara Croft's debut in 1996, we joke about the polygonal cleavage and the blocky, almost retro look of the environments. It's pretty doubtful anyone is going to be making jokes like that with the upcoming *Tomb Raider*. Brian Horton is the Senior Art Director overseeing the completion of the latest game, and we managed to ask him a few questions about the kind of work involved in not just updating, but rebooting a younger, more convincing Lara for a new generation of gamers that might not remember her Tyrannosaurus shooting ways.

C & G Magazine: How long have you been in the industry and what projects did you work on prior to Tomb Raider?

Brian Horton: I've been involved in games since graduating Savannah College of Art and Design in 1994. My first job was as an artist at Disney Interactive working on Sega Genesis and PC games, then DreamWorks Interactive/EA where I worked on *Medal of Honor* and my first Lead Artist position was on *Clive Barker's Undying*. From there I worked with an independent developer called *The Collective* on games like *Indiana Jones*, *Marc Ecko's Getting Up* and *Silent Hill*. I left development for a couple of years to work at Vivendi and Disney again before coming to Crystal Dynamics. By far, *Tomb Raider* has been the best experience of my career.

CGM: There is a dramatic departure in art style from the previous current generation game, Tomb Raider: Underworld, to Tomb Raider. Could you explain the process of going in such a different direction?

BH: When we started this game, our goal was to make a clear departure from the past titles, to make Lara and the world as grounded and believable as possible. The visual style came from the core theme of Survival and we wanted *Tomb Raider* to have an "Ominous Beauty." *Apocalypse Now* is one of my favourite films of all time; it is simultaneously one of the most beautiful and horrific movies I've ever seen. The quality of light and colour, the atmosphere and the humanity on the

screen influenced us a great deal. Rendering technology was re-written from the ground up to allow for a fully dynamic lighting—Deferred Render—and we invested heavily on elemental effects like rain, fire, fog and snow.

CGM: Is there anything being carried over art-wise from previous Tomb Raider games that would be considered essential visual elements of the Tomb Raider experience?

BH: Lost civilizations are core to the *Tomb Raider* franchise and something that we knew must exist in any incarnation of the game. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is another of my favourite films, and every time I watch it I'm transported into those tombs and temples, feeling the excitement of discovering something that was lost to time. These ingredients are and will always be central to the DNA of *Tomb Raider.*

CGM: Most action games these days tend to fall into the trap of being overly gravy and/or brown in color scheme. What is the new Tomb Raider's approach to color?

BH: We use colour and value very deliberately in *Tomb Raider* to evoke specific emotions for each moment in the game. With our key art, we crafted a colour script that changes and evolves as the game progresses. One clear example of this colour evolution would be in the Scavenger Den. The goal of that space was to reinforce claustrophobia, loneliness and fear. The cave was lit with a cool blue green light fading into black shadows but we complement this with bright hits of orange from stacked candles and torch light. The fire represents Lara's hope, her tool to survive and progress through the level. The player feels safer when holding the torch and when they lose it, they are instantly compelled to light it again. The fire's colour is directly opposite on the colour spectrum from the cave and provides a more complex colour pallet than just blue or grey. When Lara climbs up the narrow tunnel to escape we actually collapse the daylight light into a pinhole so when she emerges on the bluff she's bathed in the warm glow of the sunset, reinforcing hope. This is just one example of how we use colour to tell stories and complement emotions throughout the game.

CGM: What was the process like for coming up with the new look for this young Lara?

BH: Every character design starts with a clear biography. We knew who Lara was, but we needed to redefine her character to make her more believable and multi-dimensional. We retained her intelligence, drive and natural athleticism, but made her younger and less experienced for the origin story. This gave us some latitude to change her from the beginning to the end of the story. We introduced vulnerability to Lara; she's not perfect. She makes mistakes and will get hurt, hungry, tired and unsure of herself. What she does retain is the inner strength to keep moving and she evolves into a very powerful and confident heroine. Once we understood these things about Lara's personality we were able to make decisions on what she would look like.
Brenoch Adams and I spent two months iterating on the character design until we achieved a look that hit our goals. We wanted her proportions and surface details to be more believable; more like that of a real 21-year-old girl. We purchased clothes and boots that matched our design and did full body scans based on various models. Kam Yu, a veteran modeler of Lara on three games reworked the scan data in Zbrush until it fit the look from our concept. Our review sessions were detailed and obsessive; getting her right was a matter of tweaking millimetres. Visual Works, our sister company in Japan, did an amazing rendition for the CG trailer that helped us lock in the final look and feel for the hair. It was a collaboration that spanned the globe and I couldn't be happier with the final result.

We use colour and value very deliberately in Tomb Raider to evoke specific emotions for each moment in the game.

CGM: Previous games have relied heavily on the visual iconography of ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Greece or the South American indigenous cultures. With the setting of the new game being in the Asian region, specifically Japan, does this mean there's any kind of Asian cultural influence in the visuals?

BH: We wanted to create a Japanese civilization that was based on reality with a twist. The island of Yamatai was not a place we could visit and photograph, but I was able to find locations in Japan that helped us with the cultural detail you come to expect from a Tomb Raider game. I was in Tokyo visiting Visual Works for the trailer and I took a day trip to Nikko, a mountain village two hours train ride north. Nikko has an

ancient, shrine-filled forest, moss-covered stone statues and lanterns, and ornate wooden temples. I took thousands of pictures there and built a library of architecture, nature and props for the team to use as inspiration. What I couldn't capture on my trip, we found on the internet to make sure our vision for Yamatai felt authentic and as detailed as possible.

CGM: Previous Tomb Raider games have been more focused, linear affairs, but the new game is more open world in nature; how has this impacted the art team in terms of their workload?

BH: *Tomb Raider* is not an open world game; instead it features a series of hubs. We broke out our teams into specialist groups, with one team mostly focused on the combat and tomb spaces, one on high impact sequences and one on our large hub spaces. The hub team had the challenge of creating very large spaces with the same level of detail found in our smaller environments. We achieved this by approaching construction like you would in an open world game, streaming assets and managing levels of detail at a distance. We have three big hubs in the game and each one came with unique challenges to pull off. It was a big achievement for us and that team worked very hard to pull it off.

CGM: Has there been any notable increase in the "artistic" manpower required going from Underworld to the new Tomb Raider despite both titles being made for the same generation of consoles?

BH: The team size is about the same internally. We did work differently and made better use of outsourcing on this game versus *Underworld*; for example, Josh Bapst, our outsource art manager spent time working with our partners to help us make hundreds of props, characters and entire sections of environments off site. This allowed us to keep our team creating worlds instead of making props.

CGM: One of the things that have never been quite as dramatically rendered in previous Tomb Raider games is light. Will this change in the latest game, and if so, how?

BH: We spent a lot of the early days of the project in a foundation period, re-writing tools and lighting for this game. Our new level tool, Horizon, allows us to place lights and see the effect as we run around in the world. We now have hundreds of dynamic lights in a level, which helps us make the spaces more dynamic. We also created some really cool new post effects like light scattering to create god rays and improved our lens flares to provide more luminosity and depth to our light and effects. C&G

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Rediscovering Lara

An Interview with Darrell Gallagher

Studio head of Crystal Dynamics

Words by Seán O'Sullivan

For the better part of the past decade, Crystal Dynamics have been a studio exclusively focused on the exploits of one miss Lara Croft. Since taking over as studio head four years ago, Darrell Gallagher has been stewarding the character and franchise in daring new directions. On a recent trip to Toronto, he took time to talk with CGM about his long term commitment to Lara, the unique challenges facing modern game developers, and building for the future.

There's something almost passé about a gritty character reboot in the year 2013, but when that character is arguably the most recognizable female protagonist in videogames, it's a brave, bold move to wipe the slate clean. When Darrell Gallagher took over as studio head of Crystal Dynamics in 2009, that was his primary mandate, but first, he and the team had to prove that the franchise was pliable.

That was the reasoning behind 2010's *Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light*; "the intent was to show that we were doing things differently" he says. It paid off. The same old Lara in was put to work in a top-down, cooperative twin-stick shooter - a major departure from any other game bearing her likeness, but it enjoyed immense commercial and critical success. The words '*Tomb Raider*' didn't appear in the title because the core franchise was being rebuilt from the ground up behind closed doors, but any hesitation that publishers Square Enix had about the flexibility of the franchise were duly addressed.

After seven years of iterating on the franchise, Gallagher isn't the least bit apprehensive about renewing his vows to Lara. "As long as it's fresh, and we're breaking new ground, it doesn't become stale. We've had all sorts of challenges that we've had to overcome, new things that we're doing for the first time. The fact that Lara is at the centre certainly hasn't changed, but everything else was very different. As long as we keep pushing ourselves to do something that's not just the same formula, we can keep working on it and be excited by it."

Even if you could look past the 1996-era Lara Croft's unrealistically proportioned aesthetic, she wasn't exactly a relatable character, given her ability to accurately wield dual-pistols against endangered animals while doing backflips. Part of the focus to build a more sympathetic character involves keeping the player in control of Lara during cinematic moments of traversal, so that the bond is rarely broken. Gallagher believes that "forming a connection with the character" is essential for the overall experience, and it will resonate with the player more profoundly than the numerous ways that they're innovating in the various gameplay types that they're tackling.

As noble an endeavour as it is to push into new areas with familiar franchises, we live in an era when passionate fans can vent their anxieties directly at the developers over social media. Gallagher maintains that it's a "much tougher" environment to create in, but concedes that "it's like whatever used to happen over lunchtime conversations, or in the bars. People have always talked very candidly about their viewpoints, but now they do so via a more public forum," a reality that makes Gallagher a bit guarded about what he says. "One thing you see is that things catch fire very quickly. One statement today is a headline tomorrow, which ends up as a headline on multiple sites around the world. We want the game to do the talking, rather than me."

Compounding the frustration of these obsessive fans that crave absolute information is how protective Crystal Dynamics are of their narrative. *Tomb Raider* is a story about a scared girl who evolves into a survivor. "With each hour that goes by, you see a tremendous amount of growth - in her personality, in her equipment, in her abilities, and that arc is really strong. Start to finish is the way to experience it, which makes it difficult to say 'here's a 30 minute demo, and that's going to sum up the whole thing.'" Even the gameplay variety on offer makes it tricky to cut a slice out of "we have puzzles, action sequences, heavy combat, and large

open areas. All these flow from one to another, with no loading breaks. That fluidity is one of those things that you can't really show in 30 minutes."

Also contentious to fans is the surprise addition of multiplayer, which concerned some that resources are being routed away from the single player. For Crystal Dynamics, it's more about continuing the evolution that they began with *Guardian of Light*. "It was our first step into multiplayer, and we were building the architecture as part of our long-term road map. It's an area of modern game making where we've not really explored very much, and it represents our desire to challenge ourselves to try different styles, and continue the fiction of the world in multiplayer, but I can see that from the outside looking in, it was probably a surprise."

There's clearly a lot of fondness for *Guardian of Light* at Crystal Dynamics, but Gallagher won't commit to working on a sequel yet. "We loved making that game, we think of it as something akin to a Pixar short, and we'd like to do more. There's potential for 'Classic Lara' and the new Lara to exist in their own universes. Batman is a good example of a character with a classic and modern version - animated version, movie version. A lot of superheroes have different universes that coexist."

Crystal Dynamics have a rough idea of where they want to take new Lara once her origin story has been told, but it's not overly specific in terms of story and setting, but more "a trajectory" for her character, further reinforcing just how much consideration they're putting into curating this new take on what once amounted to little less than a clichéd sex object. "We hope that this game is received well, because we'd love to keep making them!"

Chances are that the next chapter of Lara's journey will unfold on a next generation system, and when asked if he's worried about ballooning costs associated with creating higher fidelity assets, Gallagher is not intimidated. "My guess is that the leap between generations may not be as marked as the last one," owing to the way that the current production flow involves creating high resolution assets, then compressing them down to work and look good on current technology. The tools and engine that Crystal Dynamics have built over the past three years should provide "some payoff in the next generation," so Gallagher is satisfied that the current techniques "will carry across pretty well. We'll probably have new interfaces and new ways of designing games, so those will provide curve balls, but I don't expect to see double the budget for next generation. At least I hope not, otherwise there will be very few games around!"

So what kind of experiences will developers use the extra horsepower to create? Gallagher is interested in merging the lessons learned over the past eight years, "Fusing all the things we do best; great story, great gameplay, big open worlds and all that, but seamlessly blended together."

The aggressive iteration of smart phones and their increasing aptitude to play games has got the attention of the industry, but Gallagher isn't troubled about the future of consoles just yet. "One of the reasons that I like console games, is that there's a consistency to it. I don't have to upgrade my hardware every six months. It will provide a multi-year platform that is going to stay relevant, whether it's for 10 years, or even half that, it's still reassuring. The types of games I play on my iPhone and iPad don't require a lot of time or attention, so I think of it as an alternative, complementary experience to the console games."

Regardless of the device that gets mass-market support, the team at Crystal Dynamics are confident that there will be a demand for their wares, whatever the future holds. "We certainly believe that story-driven, big budget action adventure titles like *Tomb Raider* are experiences that people want, and I don't see that going away. Even if it migrates to a different device or platform, we'll look at what our skillset is, and we'll look at the audience, and we'll try to marry both of them as closely as possible, whether PS3, Xbox, PC, Steambox, or iPad." C&G

Echoes In The Dark

An Interview With Jason Graves

Words by: Kevin Hamilton

After 17 years of smash-hit games, comic books, Angelina Jolie movies and theme park rides, Lara Croft became a video game icon and sex symbol — but also something of a joke. Known more for her breasts than her brains, Lara had the name but not the legitimacy for a release in 2013. This is one case in which a reboot was warranted, and with a grittier, more human Tomb Raider coming out on March 5, gamers will have a chance to fall in love with her all over again — for the right reasons.

In scoring this updated *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix and Crystal Dynamics have turned to Jason Graves, a BAFTA-winning composer best known for his work on *Dead Space* and *Dead Space 2*. Based in North Carolina, Graves has over a decade of experience creating music for video games and has his name stamped on over 100 titles. That hasn't dulled his creativity: read on to hear about a musical sculpture he commissioned just for Tomb Raider and his fresh vision for the franchise.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: From what we've seen and heard, your enthusiasm for the project has been really palpable. Were you excited about the high profile of the series, or are you a fan of the games themselves?

Jason Graves: The biggest thing that drew me to the title, besides the legacy of the series itself, was the legitimate sense of trust Crystal Dynamics had in me as a composer, right from the very beginning. They wanted to brand *Tomb Raider* with the kind of unique musical identity I had given *Dead Space*, though obviously with something original for their game. And they stood by their word! I had complete creative freedom to experiment and try out new, interesting ideas. The most of any game since the original *Dead Space* score back in 2008.

CGM: We know you were asked to do a completely fresh take on the series; nevertheless, did you take any inspiration from past Tomb Raider games, or from the movies?

JG: I had played my fair share of *Tomb Raider* when it first came out, but it had been ten years since I had really paid attention to anything in that world. Honestly, that's a good place to start if you're asked to reinvent a huge franchise, because I was really able to come at it with a fresh point of view. I didn't remember how any of the music went specifically, but I did remember what I felt like when I played the game. I tried to capture my own musical interpretation of that memory when composing the score for the new *Tomb Raider*.

CGM: You've received a lot of praise for your work on Dead Space — do you credit your success in that game with being chosen for Tomb Raider? What else do you think factored into the decision?

JG: I know they were looking for a multifaceted score - something that could be tense and dark one moment and shift to quiet and vulnerable the next. The *Dead Space* scores proved I could do the tense, dark bits well enough. All it took after that was a simple phone call...that ended up lasting almost two hours! We just seemed to click immediately on the phone. Everything they were looking for was pretty much outlining my idea of a dream project, so I didn't try and hide my enthusiasm. A few days later they brought me on board.

CGM: Dead Space is another game that focuses on the horror and desperation of trying to stay alive in a hostile environment. What elements have you carried through to this new project?

JG: The biggest thing I learned from *Dead Space* was the power and simplicity of musical textures. Practically the entire score to *Dead Space* is nothing but orchestral textures. I've been obsessed with musical textures like that ever since. By "textures," I mean the kinds of sounds you can get from instruments by playing them incorrectly or in an unusual manner, especially ones that can be sustained over long periods of time. I furthered this idea in *Tomb Raider*, but this time instead of hiring an orchestra to perform the textures I recorded myself playing a detuned mandolin with pencils, banging on an acoustic bass with vibraphone mallets or bowing a Persian Dulcimer with a cello bow. One of my favourites was definitely bowing the leftover chicken fencing from the backyard. That actually made it into a large portion of the final score.

CGM: Much of the marketing for this game has a big emphasis on loss, struggle and pain. What other themes does the game focus on, and how have you brought that out through your music?

JG: Actually, most of the game really does focus on loss, struggle and pain! It's just that kind of game. One of the things I loved about Lara's story is the effort and time spent planning her character arc. You're able to witness her transformation from an unsure, inexperienced college graduate to a battle-hardened, confident leader. As a composer, being familiar with that arc means being able to properly compose the music accordingly and match what she's feeling.

As a result, the music in the beginning of the game is a lot more off rhythm with odd time signatures and strange sounding percussion instruments and textures. Lara is very uncertain and even scared - you don't really hear Lara's theme stated unless it's by a tentative flute or soft, high strings. Later in the game, Lara has gained confidence and the score is extremely propulsive and dynamic. Lara's theme blares away in the low brass and french horns and the percussion is very big and driving.

CGM: You seem to have an affinity for creating and improvising new instruments, almost like a foley artist would. In your studio we've seen everything from a gutted piano to "The Fencenator," which consists of a roll of chicken wire on a trash can lid. Did you use any of these in the production of the score?

JG: It's become a bit of an addiction, honestly! But it's just so much fun and so rewarding to have those unique, original sounds in the music. The Fencenator is actually one of the signature sounds of the Scavengers - the main antagonists Lara encounters on the island. You can hear it throughout the game as she battles them. The piano soundboard you mentioned didn't get any recording time in *Tomb Raider*. It's being used on some other games to great effect, however!

CGM: There's also something you had custom-made for this project. Aptly named "The Instrument." Can you describe how you used it to produce sounds for Tomb Raider?

JG: There are three major components making up The Instrument - four metal pipes, three glass bowls and a metal base with lots of spines sticking out of it. Those three components make up three different major sections of the score. The metal base is either struck with sticks or bowed and represents the Scavengers. It can sound like soft, mysterious flutes or scream and wail like distorted guitar feedback. The four metal pipes are struck with soft or hard mallets and represent, well, another group on the island Lara encounters later in the game. Lastly, the glass bowls are softly played with yarn mallets, but immediately recognizable in the score. They represent The Island itself and are featured prominently throughout the second half of the game.

CGM: The full "Survivor" trailer premiered at 2012's Spike TV VGAs, which you conducted live on stage. What was the experience like.

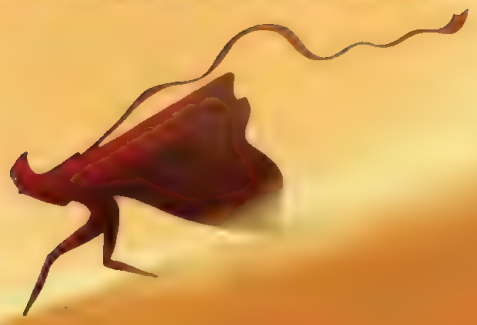
JG: The experience was amazing. LA is host to such a wealth of talent and amazing studios. And the set of the VGAs was definitely a lot flashier than any recording studio I've been in! It was first class all the way and I'm so happy to have been a part of it. And, of course, it was great sharing the same stage with Samuel Jackson!

Lastly, from your somewhat privileged position, what's something you can say to get people excited about the new Tomb Raider?

JG: I can honestly say this is the most exciting game I've worked on, both in the overall story and gameplay sequences. And I've been doing this for more than eleven years, spanning over one hundred titles. C&G

MUSICAL JOURNEYS

AN INTERVIEW WITH AUSTIN WINTORY



Words by Wayne Santos

Journey ended up surprising everyone with how well received it was. Few doubted the game would be something special after the track record of Thatgamecompany's previous releases, but what caught many critics off guard was the warm public reception. Part of that is at least partly because of the music. Even the marketing for *Journey* was wise enough to preview the compositions of Austin Wintory as part of the game's appeal, and now that same composer has enjoyed a Grammy nomination, the first ever for an entire game soundtrack. We managed to get some time with gaming's newest musical sensation to ask him about his career.

C & G Magazine: When did you know your interest in music was professional rather than just amateur appreciation?

Austin Wintory: Funny, no one's ever asked me that. I was always very deeply passionate about composing, though perhaps I discovered it when I was about 10 years old. But initially I wanted to be a game designer. So I took a computer programming class, but I was also studying music at the same time. Very quickly it became clear to me that music was the way to go. So I thought, "From here, going forward, I'm just a composer now." I never at any point felt like an amateur, I always felt like an aspiring professional.

CGM: If you wanted to be a games designer you must have had a lot of inspiration.

AW: Oh I was a big gamer as a kid. The adventure games of the 90s, some of my favourite games of all time were *The Dig*, and *Grim Fandango*. But I loved it all. I was a big *Command & Conquer* fan, the original *Warcraft* games, *Starcraft*, and pretty much anything that said *Star Wars* on it. I was always more of a PC gamer than a console gamer, though I had an N64 and GameCube.

CGM: So how did you go from being interested in games and music to making music for games?

AW: I really just loved to make music in general and loved writing concert music in high school. I kind of took over my high school music program and learned to conduct. I was also hugely passionate about film

and in college got into composing for student films. Along the way, at USC, I did a student game for a guy, who then recommended me to one of his classmates, who turned out to be Jenova Chen. So I did *flOw* and it got picked up as a PlayStation 3 game, and then we were both off and running in our careers. It's been totally nuts. Absolutely wild. I just got lucky that I met that guy, we made a game, and he passed me along to Jenova Chen.

CGM: Were there any compositions in the games you played growing up that you found exceptional or inspiring?

AW: I was certainly in love with all the Pete McConnell scores in the LucasArts games. But the specific one that you're talking about, that, as a composer I was blown away, was the score to *Total Annihilation*. I thought, "This is no joke music, this is some pretty serious writing." At the time most of the LucasArts scores tended to have a comedy aspect to them. The music was sort of a lighter fare. It wasn't the serious, dramatic orchestral music that I'd fallen in love with from guys like John Williams. And when I heard Jeremy Soule's work in *Total Annihilation* I thought it was quite serious for an American game. I say American because, y'know, *Final Fantasy* and those games took music very seriously.

CGM: So "One-Winged Angel" wasn't a revelation of music in games for you?

AW: It's funny, because the aesthetic is so different. I've always had an appreciation and, at times, deep admiration for *Final Fantasy* scores. But for some reason, they've never been my favourite. I enjoy them, I've performed in concerts alongside those pieces many times, especially a piece like "One-Winged Angel," or the "Liberi Fatali" from *Final Fantasy VIII* which is a regular at game concerts. But I actually get more enjoyment from the fan reaction to them than the pieces themselves. I just love the idea that there is music in the world that makes people that excited. As soon as "One-Winged Angel" starts with that big Stravinsky opening, the audience immediately clicks into what it is and starts screaming. That energy, that passion in the room, is what does it for me. Although growing up, I listened to *Chrono Trigger* again and again.

CGM: You score for games, but you score films as well. Do you find any differences in composing for the two?

AW: From a technological standpoint, there's some pretty big differences. Games are very technology driven in a way that films aren't. I don't have to understand how a DP works to score for a film, but I find that in games, at least the way I like to score them, which is a pretty immersive way, I need to get into the production process. I think they have more in common though than they don't, which is to write music that is meaningful. And to relish the collaboration with fellow artists. But interactivity puts games off in their own territory that they have no equivalent to. There's no analogue to interactive music in another medium. But the fundamental reason of why I do it is the same across all of them.

CGM: What's the perception like in the music industry about scoring games? Is there a stigma?

AW: When I was starting out about six or seven years ago, I definitely sensed some of that. Interestingly enough I sensed it most from the composers themselves. Composers felt videogames were a stepping stone to films, which was always regarded as the most prestigious place to go. Scoring a big Hollywood movie with a million dollar music budget represented the zenith of where your career could possibly go. They'd say "Why be Marty O'Donnell when you could be James Newton Howard?" I've never felt that way. I've always thought Marty does amazing work and James Newton Howard does amazing work.

But I think in the last several years, especially as economically viable indie models have emerged, I think a lot of that has evaporated. Certainly in the composer community. I know people who want nothing but to score games, and I know people that want to only score films, and I know people like me that want to do both.

CGM: Is it true you worked on the score for Journey over the course of three years? Was it very different from the film scoring experience.

AW: Oh yeah, definitely. It wasn't that it was different, so much as a more exaggerated, drawn out version of [working on film]. But some aspects were very different. For example, Jenova would call me and say "We're working on a section of the game," and he'd describe it. It would be something I hadn't seen yet, only the documents, no playable prototype. So he'd describe that and say "And this is sort of what it's supposed to feel like." Then he'd ask, "Would you go and write a piece of music that captures that in your mind?"

So I'd go and write a piece of music, which we would refer to as overtures, just based on his ideas and themes. Then he'd take it, put it on loop, and listen to it while he was designing the level, and let it inform his design decisions. Then a prototype would be made available for me to play, and I'd pull it off the server, play it, and my music would be in there, and I'd think, "Oh man, this music I made sucks. This game he made from it is amazing. I don't know how he got this from the music, because the music is stupid compared to this."

So then I'd throw out that music and go write new

music, and he would get new ideas from that. Which, in turn, made me not like my music anymore. And we would go back and forth, pushing each other higher and higher. That's the kind of thing you can only do when you're talking about this kind of timeline that we worked under. But it was unbelievable. Absolutely amazing. It gave me a chance to constantly throw music out and rewrite it, and make it better. It went on for so long that I was joking with Kellee [Santiago] the producer that I was anticipating post-partum depression when the game finally came out because I'd forgotten what it was like to not have *Journey* be part of my life.

CGM: When did you realize that Journey was going to be more than just another soundtrack?

AW: A year before release, we sent out the first teaser trailer and that had the theme in it. But it wasn't even the theme as it appears in the soundtrack, I had this solo cello, and flute, but all the rest of the orchestra were all still computer generated. And I'd look on YouTube at the trailer and every other comment was "What is this piece of music? Where can I download this?"

That was the first clue. And then of course, when the reviews started coming in, and most reviews spent a while talking about the music, which primed things for the soundtrack, which came out a month later. But the really big shock came when I got a phone call from a guy at Billboard [Magazine] saying they were publishing their Billboard chart, and this game was on there, and I thought, "You've got to be kidding me."

CGM: And now that you've made one of the most emotive soundtracks in the industry, you're working on Leisure Suit Larry next?

AW: It's been funny to me how bewildering that is to people, because for me, criteria number one is, "Who are the people I'm working with?" If they're people I like, it really doesn't matter to me what they're making. Criteria number two is, "Is it an opportunity to explore somewhere new musically?" So the last thing that I would want to follow *Journey* with is something that's similar to *Journey*.

So as it happens, I've been fortunate enough to be offered something that is the diametric opposite of *Journey*. I couldn't think of anything that I would want more than that. Al Lowe called me himself, out of the blue, and said "My name's Al Lowe, I made a franchise in the 80s and 90s called *Leisure Suit Larry*." And I was like, "Dude, you don't have to tell me who you are, I'm a fan." And he said "We're working on a new game and we'd like you to score it." I couldn't believe it. I actually had written in jazz idioms before, that had that sexy swing quality to it, but I couldn't have expected Al Lowe or Replay Games to know that. In their eyes, I'm the guy that did *Journey*. So to me it was a slam dunk. CG

A Grammy nomination for *Journey* does a lot for the music industry's perception of videogame music.

MADE AMERICAN

An Interview with American McGee

Words by Wayne Santos

While the name Spicy Horse may not be quite as familiar to gamers as names like BioWare or Infinity Ward, the name American McGee will fire a few neurons in the memory banks. Once a developer working at id Software, McGee struck out on his own, releasing games like *Scrapland*, *Bad Day in L.A.* and most recently, *Alice: Madness Returns*. Their latest project, *Akaneiro* is best described as '*Diablo* meets *Okami*,' a combination of action RPG and Japanese woodcut illustration aesthetic. The game is currently in development, but it's also available for crowdsource investment on Kickstarter, a popular destination for independent developers that want to offer something other than a conventional big budget game. We managed to talk to American himself and ask him a few questions about his latest project.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: What are your feelings on the state of the ARPG in today's gaming world? Right now both *Diablo III* and *Torchlight II* are the most prominent examples of the genre.

American McGee: Having been a fan of the genre for over two decades now, I've seen its popularity rise and fall. The more interesting advances tend to happen around new technologies and methods for distribution – combined with unique story-telling and setting. New audiences and new delivery platforms mean developers can constantly reinvent the form; these days we're fortunate to see a re-emergence on web and tablets.

CGM: How did the idea of doing an Action RPG come about at Spicy Horse?

AM: At the start of 2011 we were wrapping up *Alice: Madness Returns* and looking to pivot away from the world of boxed console games. I put together a pitch and went out looking for investors to back us. Part of our strategy at that time was to take a shotgun approach to genres and audiences... while building a unified platform for delivery of multiplayer content across a wide range of platforms and devices. In 2012 we launched two titles under this new model – *BigHead BASH*, a multiplayer deathmatch game; *Crazy Fairies*, a multiplayer turn-based artillery game; and a third for early 2013, *Akaneiro*, an online ARPG.

CGM: From there, what was the thinking that led to the Japanese Woodcut aesthetic?

AM: Ben Kerslake, the project's Creative Director was also heavily involved in guiding visuals on *Alice: Madness Returns*. *A:MR* featured an Asian domain which the team had a lot of fun building – but on which they also learned a lot of interesting techniques for delivering the visual style in-game. Ben wanted to continue exploring the concept and *Akaneiro* provided a natural playground.

CGM: Were *Okami* or the works of Vanillaware any kind of influence or inspiration on the art direction?

AM: *Akaneiro* draws a lot of comparisons to *Okami*, for which we feel flattered. *Okami* was a real milestone in terms of visuals. The art team also took a lot of inspiration from original works of art coming out of Japan around the same time as the setting of the game. There's a lot of wonderful material to work with from that era.

CGM: Can you tell us anything about the progression mechanics of the game? Will we be seeing levels, XP accumulation and putting new points into skills?

Akaneiro draws a lot of comparisons to *Okami*, for which we feel flattered. *Okami* was a real milestone in terms of visuals.

AM: Levels and XP accumulation are there as you'd expect. When it comes to applying new points to skills, we've automated a lot of what might normally happen when you level-up. Player selection of skill improvement instead comes from training, which players can access through one of the characters in the main village. The team have also taken a less rigid approach to skills and classes – allowing players to dabble in a wide range of training even if the related skills don't necessarily align with expectations about the character class.

CGM: The *Torchlight* series has made pets a useful tool for selling and retrieving items while players are still in dungeons, so as to prevent having to break up the adventure and fast travel back to town to resupply. Will *Akeinero* be doing anything similar?

AM: We've talked about stashes and ways player can return items to the village and will be including features to handle this. We've not yet decided what form that feature will take though. Expect to see that added in some of the early build updates.

CGM: How big is the game initially going to be on launch in terms of content? How many hours will an average player get out of the initial experience?

AM: Size-wise we're seeing builds come in around 400 mb. That number will increase over time as we—hopefully—add new content packs. When we release the final game, January 2013, there will be upwards of 25 maps, with more maps and content packs to be released over time. The initial chunk of content should take a "normal" player more than 30 hours to complete. They would have the option to replay at a number of different difficulty levels – all that hopefully amounting to more than enough content to keep people happy until the next content pack is launched.

CGM: What is the rationale behind the decision to go free-to-play?

AM: We think it offers players the best opportunity to decide when and how much to pay for content that they are interested in. Being that they can enter into a game and engage with it for free means they're getting the benefits of a model like shareware. And by integrating the purchase mechanic into the world we're hoping to make monetization more seamless. That being said, we know there are a lot of bad examples of F2P out there and we're doing everything we can to avoid those versions of the model. One really great thing that's come out of this new phase of life for our studio is that connection we've built to our audience. With two F2P games already in the market, we've had a chance to listen and learn a lot from our players. Hopefully that learning will shine through in *Akaneiro*.

CGM: What does this particular business model need to achieve in order to succeed? Obviously no money is being made from purchases of the game, so what needs to happen to achieve profitability?

AM: It's pretty simple actually. We need a small percentage of players to pay for accelerated access to content that they could otherwise get by simply grinding their way through the game. Or for any player to pay for cosmetic items just for the fun of it – see hats in *TF2* as an example. Typically, developers see only a small

percentage of players converting to paying customers, usually less than five per cent. Finding the balance is critical to keeping the players happy and keeping the developer alive. We're still learning, but we're still in business and our existing players are all pretty happy.

CGM: *Akaneiro* has already been in beta and is also holding a spot on Valve's Greenlight Project so in some respects, the game is already much further along in development than most Kickstarter projects. Why did you decide to put it on Kickstarter now, rather than earlier in the development cycle?

AM: We've seen Kickstarter games get torpedoed because there were questions about whether or not the developer could actually achieve their stated goal. If Spicy Horse, with no experience making an ARPG, as a whole team, or with making online/tablet F2P games, had presented this project back in the concept phase, do you think it would have been funded? I don't. Beyond that, it's a simple question of us maintaining our schedule and budget – something we've historically been very good at – while looking for alternative methods to increasing our development time-line. If we were in a standard publisher-developer relationship then we'd go back to "Daddy Publisher" and ask for more time/money. Being that we're indie that's not an option. Before Kickstarter we would have delivered on our launch plans, which we're going to do anyway, then waited to see if enough revenue was generated to support additional development. With Kickstarter we can ask players to judge whether or not our additional goals are worthy of funding.

CGM: One of the things the Kickstarter campaign mentions is that meeting the funding goal will allow for the implementation of multiplayer. How hard is this to develop?

AM: Because all of our games are based on a similar client-server back-end and some of our other games already have real-time multiplayer, the implementation isn't going to be super hard. The issue is that we should be pulling our tech guys off *Akaneiro* and putting them onto new projects. If we're going to survive we've got to keep feeding the content pipeline. By hitting the Kickstarter goals we'd be able to keep our tech guys focused on *Akaneiro* longer. There are a ton of things we'd love to add to *Akaneiro*, but we're limited by time more than ability or difficulty.

CGM: On another note, for the most part you are an expatriate working far from the land of your origin. How difficult was it to adapt to a new culture, and is there any need or motivation to learn the language and customs of that culture, or is it easier to simply maintain your American language and practices?

AM: Moving to China and starting a studio in Shanghai has been a truly excellent adventure. At this point I know the only way I'll ever do the experience justice is to write a book about it. Perhaps something to do once I've retired. In the meantime, all I can say is it's been great. I've learned so much about myself, about human beings – and obviously about all things China. I feel really lucky that I landed here, now. It's a truly historic period for China and the world; witnessing it firsthand will be something I cherish for the rest of my life.

Motivation comes quite naturally here. I love to push my own boundaries; I maintain a fair number of diverse hobbies. Those hobbies push me out into the world and force me to learn new bits of language, navigation and interaction. I don't attempt to maintain "American practices" here... actually, I think one of the keys to living in a foreign country is flexibility. You have to be willing and able to adjust your expectations and your reactions.

CGM What is the current state of the game development industry in China right now? How does Spicy Horse fit into it?

AM: It's massive. China contains the world's largest gaming community and Chinese game operators, equivalent to Western publishers, are the largest gaming companies in the world both in terms of financial and workforce. We don't fit in at all! Spicy is one of a very small number of independent developers in China. The majority of development work here is split between Operators who develop content for the local market and Outsourcers who develop content for the rest of the world. If you play Western console games like *Call of Duty* or *Medal of Honor*, you are playing Chinese made art content. So, we're an oddity because we're independently owned and we're creating original content for the global game market. Actually, this is exactly why I wanted to open shop here. I figured if there was an indie developer creating interesting content, such a studio would attract a lot of great talent away from the operators and outsourcers. 6+ years later and we've proven that point.

CGM: In more general terms, Spicy Horse now has experienced developing games on mobile platforms, on digital PC platforms and even traditional, physical, disc-based console platforms. What are your thoughts on how these aspects of the industry are developing?

AM: I've been saying for a while that traditional boxed games are going away. That was a controversial statement just 12 months ago. Now seems pretty obvious to everyone. Mobile will become the new console, or console will become mobile, take your pick. Digital delivery will dominate. But we're missing the next big thing – until someone revolutionizes I/O. I've got an eye on things like Oculus Rift. Whoever gives us *Matrix*-style "plugging in" will bring the next true era of gaming. Until then, we're all just marking time as best we can. CGM

Back in BlackBerry

Talking BB10 with Anders Jeppsson

Back in 1999 the world was a much different place. In those days Y2K was on everyone's mind, no one had ever heard of things like Google, Twitter, or YouTube, and a relatively unknown Canadian manufacturer introduced the world to a device called... a BlackBerry. Fast forward to 2003 and the smart phone revolution was just getting started. Since the first iPhone was still four years away BlackBerry was poised to kick this party off the right way, and they did by introducing the first line of BlackBerry smart phones. Fast forward once again to the present and the smart phone market has changed dramatically. In the past it was only business folk and CEOs who needed to be connected all of the time, but today everyone from toddlers to the elderly probably has a smart phone. Once Google and Apple entered the smart phone market with their super friendly "anyone can use it" devices BlackBerrys quickly became relegated to the business world. You could play all day on your iPhone but a BlackBerry was for work not play. Since then the little company from Waterloo Ontario has been losing ground and market share to devices running Android and iOS. There are still a few of us (myself included) who cling to our classic BlackBerry Bold or Curve while surrounded by friends running Android or iOS but it's getting harder and harder to ignore the thunder of the crowd.

Building a Better Mobile OS

It's time for a change, and BB10 and the new BlackBerry Z10 and Q10 may be the change that BlackBerry needs to put themselves back in competition with the

two headed beast of a competitor that is Google and Apple. One of the people at BlackBerry who is leading this charge back into the hearts smart phone users is Anders Jeppsson BlackBerry's Global Director of the Gaming Category. Jeppsson came to BlackBerry with their acquisition of The Astonishing Tribe and was put in charge of their Gaming category due to his many years as a mobile game developer. Recently, I had a chance to speak with Anders about BB10's development and what this new mobile platform means to gamers.

BlackBerry's new mobile platform didn't just appear overnight, according to Jeppsson it all started about three years ago, with "Major acquisitions that really added new DNA to what was needed to build the future of mobile." More impressive to him was the acquisition of QNX, BB10's underlying operating system, which, to him, "Was the smartest move that I have ever seen in this space. It's an amazing operating system. It runs everything from the Intl. Space Station to hundreds of car brands to most of Las Vegas to all of the Cisco routers. It's a really small yet robust system that would work really well in a mobile computing distributed environment."

From a development standpoint it seems that this idea of easy access and portability are some of the key features of BB10. That access, according to Anders is critical because for developers it meant "No locking them into objective C or C# like Microsoft did, or force them to use Direct X instead of OpenGL like Windows 8 is doing." The reason for this is that BlackBerry really wants to help app and game developers succeed, "They are our life blood in the end so if they can make money on our platform, then it's good for us." There's already a great example of this portability with *The Bard's Tale*, a game that was first released for the original Xbox in 2004 but has seen some recent success on mobile platforms. Anders told me about InExile Entertainment's porting experience. "It took them less than three days to port *The Bard's Tale* over and less than 26 hours recoup their development funds. If you can make your money back in 26 hours it shows that it's a pretty good SDK and tool set."

BlackBerry seems pretty keen on getting those killer apps found on iOS and Android over to BB10. Making it easy and affordable for game developers to port their existing code into the BlackBerry environment is a smart way to reach platform parity despite being new to the market.

Gaming on BB10

BlackBerry has definitely made the BB10 platform attractive to game and application developers but I was curious to know what advantages the new platform had for gamers. The aforementioned ease of portability could allow for current games which are already successful on Android or iOS to come over to BB10 very quickly and it would be in BlackBerry's best interest to facilitate this rapid development. BB10 is being released six years after iOS and five after Android first hit the mobile scene so there's a decent amount of catch up to be done. One of the ways that BlackBerry is increasing the visibility of their available software is through social discovery. "We have consumers that are willing to pay for a premium experience, they don't have time to wade through ten thousand apps when they're looking for five of them." One of the ways that BlackBerry users will be able to

At this point it's difficult to tell whether BB10 will be the amazing be all and end of mobile OS or simply a step in the right direction.

see what apps their friends are using won't be through third party social networks it will be through first party offerings like BlackBerry's quintessential social network BlackBerry Messenger, or BBM. "People want to be able to share what they've done, if they play *Subway Surfers* and they beat their friend's score they want to immediately put that in their face and have a reaction. If you post that on Facebook your friend might not see that until five days later because it's not an immediate social platform compared to BBM." BlackBerry plans to accomplish this with their games app which will be similar to Apple's Game Center but it will of course be designed by BlackBerry and feature integration with BBM. This games app features technology from a company named Scoreloop, which is another one of BlackBerry's recent acquisitions. Despite the company a being a subsidiary of BlackBerry the apps don't appear to be exclusive to BB10, you can also discover Android apps alongside BlackBerry apps on Scoreloop's website.

With BB10 comes another exclusive feature that actually may hold a serious amount of value to people who game on their phone. BB10's "Peek" feature allows you to look at incoming messages while playing without leaving the game. "If I'm playing a game in full screen and that light starts blinking, with BB10 the peek function, allows me to just peek in and see who sent me that message, and if it's not my boss I don't care so I can stay in the bathroom and keep playing poker." Definitely a valuable feature for those gamers out there who like to play *Texas Hold 'em* or *Jetpack Joyride* on company time.

Be Bold or Get Torched

At this point it's really difficult to tell whether BB10 will be the amazing be all and end of mobile operating systems or simply a step in the right direction. With one phone already on the market and the reviews coming in it seems like it may be a case of the latter. While speaking with Jeppsson there was definitely an attitude of enthusiasm about BB10, but that's to be expected from a company that's about launch their biggest product in years. The success or failure of BB10 won't be written at launch it will be written over the next year as we begin to see more and more apps released for the platform. The ease of porting software to the platform and it's nearly complete lack of piracy make it very attractive to app developers and a few big ones have already signed on to develop for BB10. Rovio, EA, Disney, and HalfBrick Studios are just a few of the game developers that have committed to BB10 with more to follow. BB10 has also had success with a variety of game engines. By Jeppsson's reckoning, "Last year we had Marmalade (a game engine/abstraction layer), Shiva was ported over and the Unity engine added support via Union. I think we've crossed all the Ts and dotted all the Is by now so there's a lot of great stuff coming." There's a lot of value to be found with the new BlackBerry devices and the company may be on the upswing of the curve. Whether consumers will be bold enough to choose BlackBerry over an iOS or Android device remains to be seen. However, nobody is going to put this new platform to the torch just yet. C&G

For **Juri**, the big letter on the box is a good start. But sometimes she wants to know more about the games **Sean** and **Maia** want to play. And now she can, **right from her phone**, right from the store.

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Juri

Lakeside, CA

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2013:
The Year Of The Superheroine

Words by Nicole Rodrigues

We've heard several announcements from Marvel over the past few months, touting new series focusing on female characters. The most recent (and newsworthy) was Brian Wood's *X-Men* reboot, featuring only female team members. Though I don't think fighting sexism by segregating sexes in a team book is necessarily the best idea in the long run, it's a wonderful opportunity to showcase the amazing women in the X-Verse. It's also great news because Marvel's lagged behind DC for some time when it comes to number of books based on or fronted by female characters. They're stepping up their game and will soon boast several new titles that fit that description (e.g. *Fearless Defenders*, *X-Men*) to add to their list of existing series like *Captain Marvel*, *Journey Into Mystery*, and *Red She-Hulk*. It's an exciting time to be a super-heroine in the Marvel universe.

Which is why you're on notice, Marvel, because fans deserve great books about the female heroes they love... so don't mess it up by cancelling them at the drop of a hat.

Call me cynical, but I've seen my share of Marvel series marketed on their inclusion of female characters that ended up selling well solely due to gratuitous use of these character's sex appeal—*Heroes for Hire* tentacle cover porn anyone? Or books that pandered to what creators assumed women readers were interested in (e.g., pedicures and random girl on girl kissing for fanboys like in the recent A+X team-up book with Black Widow and Rogue).

Don't get me wrong, I don't think that these new Marvel titles will fall prey to those pitfalls as there are some really great creators and artists involved. I'm a big fan of Wood's past *X-Men* work and Kelly Sue DeConnick has been writing *Captain Marvel* incredibly well for a while now. Given the opportunity, I believe the teams on these new books will do amazing things with these characters. Historically though, Marvel has not kept many women-fronted titles on shelves for very long before they're inevitably cancelled. Do a quick search on Spider-Woman to see her tumultuous past—from becoming so popular she had her own animated series and promotional merchandise to being cancelled abruptly despite her continued success. There are a lot of variables to balance when it comes to making a series successful, but DC has consistently kept female heroes a regular part of their publishing repertoire.

DC has very iconic female heroes in their roster, many who have maintained an ongoing series for quite some time. Not including breaks in their publication history, Wonder Woman has been running for close to seventy years, Supergirl near twenty and Batgirl for at least ten. Marvel unfortunately can't make that same claim, even though they have just as many if not more female heroes in their universe. The longest running Marvel title fronted by a heroine was She-Hulk, totalling about twelve years in publication, followed by Spider-Girl at eight years and Spider-Woman/Ms. Marvel tying for third at approximately six years each. DC has been around longer, but even if you put that aside, how recognized are the super-heroines of both universes?

Ask any casual comic fan to name a female character and you're likely to hear at least one or two of the DC heroines mentioned, but much more likely to hear Jean Grey/Phoenix or Black Widow (popular more recently thanks to the Avengers film) for Marvel. The women with their own books at Marvel are not the most well known characters. By that rhetoric, it's somewhat amazing that She-Hulk and Spider-Girl lasted as long as they did. However, with their popularity even among

casual fans, how come Storm or Black Widow don't have (and never had) their own ongoing series?

Though DC's female characters are certainly more iconic, Marvel's are more relatable. Many female fans (myself included) identify more with characters like Rogue or Mary Jane than Supergirl or Wonder Woman. Marvel's heroes have always been more inherently flawed, which made them more realistic to readers. It's easier to relate to someone who has personal problems similar to your own (e.g., feeling like an outcast, being attracted to someone you can't be with) than to others that you wouldn't encounter as a mere mortal (e.g., being a Themyscarian princess with super strength). Good writers find a way to make heroes relatable no matter what super abilities they have, but it can be easier when your characters already have more in common with your readers. I grew up reading Chris Claremont's *X-Men*, a team of mutant outcasts who work together for the greater good despite being very different from each other. His run on *X-Men* felt a lot like high school at times, mixing drama and romance with great stories of outsiders finding somewhere to belong. Claremont's run also made it obvious that Marvel made some pretty badass women who became entrenched in my mind as complex but strong role models. That goes for a lot of the male characters too, as gender didn't prevent me from relating to them in other ways.

The popularity of DC's female-fronted books shows that the common misconception that male readers are not interested in female heroes is blatantly untrue. The proof is in the sales numbers; the majority of comic readers are still men, even though that has shifted over the years. More and more women are comic fans, reading a wide variety of titles about an ever-wider variety of characters. Just because it's a book about a woman doesn't mean it's only for women. Men may not be able to relate with everything a female character does, but if their personality or stories weren't interesting, women wouldn't be reading most of the big two publisher's comics about male heroes. It's a bad excuse for not having more solo comics about heroes who happen to be women. They just need to be well written and drawn. A daunting task, I know.

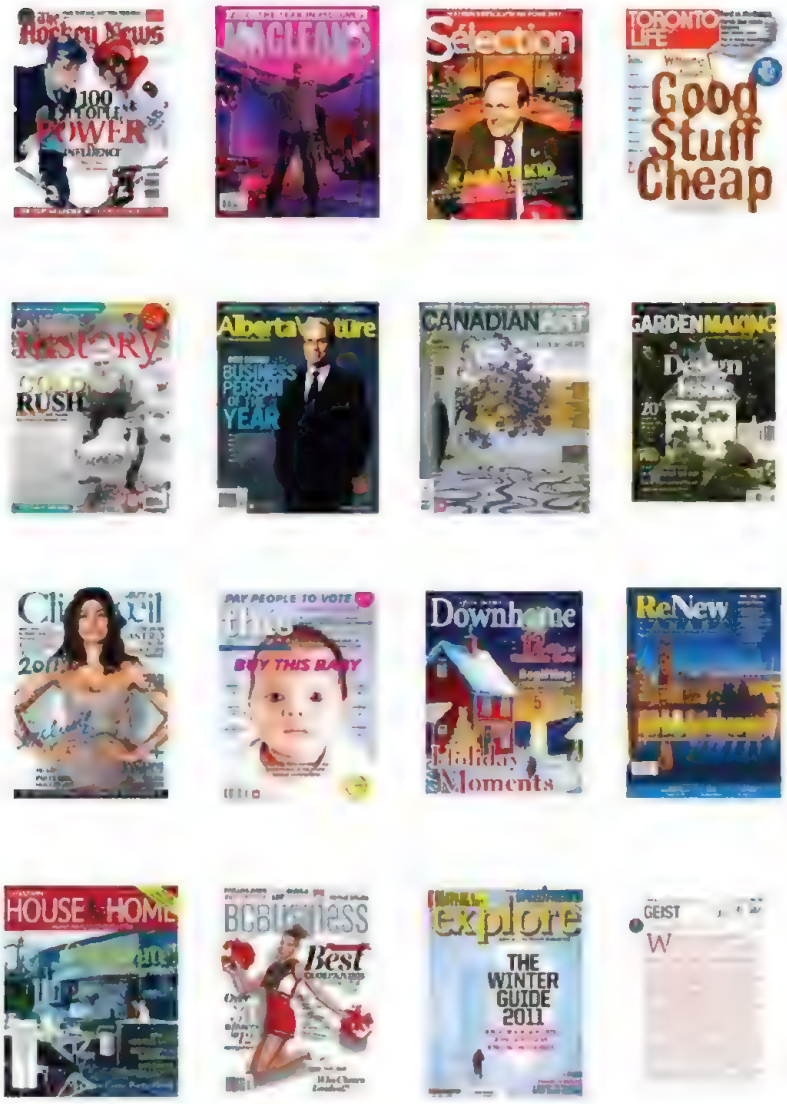
How women are portrayed in comics is as crucial as how they're written. Their poses, how they stand, what they look like in battle: this all conveys a lot about who they are and how readers will interpret them. You can take the strongest heroine, both mentally and physically, but if she's only ever drawn in suggestive, submissive poses, that can negate her inherent strength. There are very few exceptions to that rule, which is why it's simply better to not fall back on those poses or situations. Both writers and artists have to think beyond trying to portray interesting women and focus on portraying interesting people. By boiling down female characters into stereotypical feminine aspects, what makes them unique, fascinating people is quickly over-

ridden by cliché. I don't want to delve too deeply into the sexism debate when it comes to comics because that would be enough material for a completely separate article. What I do want to note quickly though is that there's nothing inherently wrong with a female character being sexual or sexy in a comic, but I have a few caveats before I feel comfortable continuing to read it. Her sexuality should be one of her traits, not her only defining feature—unless she's an evil succubus but really, that's been done to death so why bother—and she's written with enough depth that readers can list off other defining traits beyond her body or her costume. Tall order, I know. There are writers who are able to bring strong, sexy women to life without it feeling exploitative or gratuitous for a second. They're unfortunately not the norm quite yet in the industry, but I do believe it's getting better over time. Especially with every new female writer or artist that takes on telling these characters' stories.

Every time you buy a comic book, you're making your money vote towards its continued success.

Even though my tone may seem abysmal at times, I am honestly really excited to read these new series from Marvel. I don't doubt for a second that the creators they've put on these books will do amazing things with these characters long term. Although executives can and do cut series' short on whims at times, strong sales are very persuasive. This is where fans have some power. Every time you buy a comic book, you're making your money vote towards its continued success. Make your comic dollars count this year by supporting titles with the heroes you love and give some new series' a shot, even if they're not your usual fare. They might just surprise you, and get you hooked on a new book.

Me? I'm hoping for the pleasant surprise of these women heroes still kicking butt in five or 10 years. You hear that Marvel? C&G



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GENUINE CANADIAN MAGAZINE

THE WALK
DEAI

REVIEWS

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REVIEW GUIDE:

90 - 100
Games with little to no flaws that provide an exceptional entertainment experience. New high watermarks of quality or design are established with such titles, and these games are must-haves for fans of the genre as well as good places for newcomers to start.

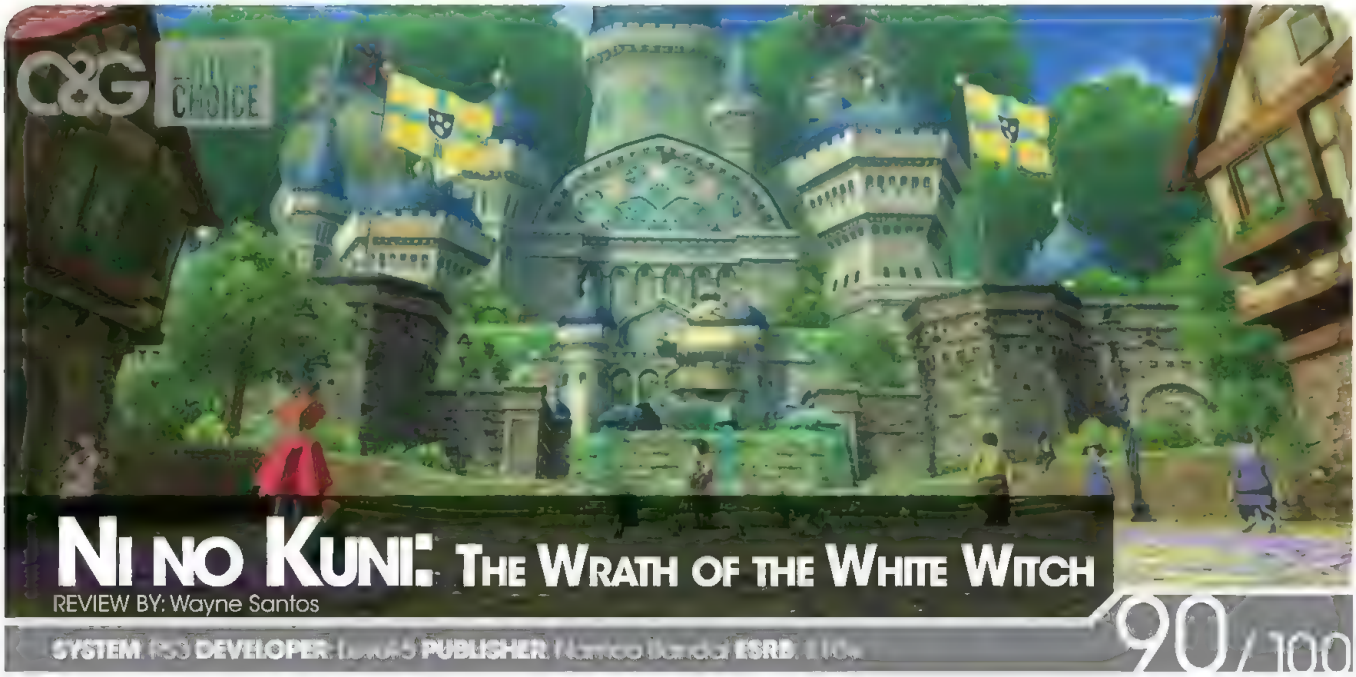
80 - 89
Games that manage to provide a good, entertaining experience with only small flaws that are overlooked by the polish or innovation of the title. Both fans and newcomers to the genre will likely find something to appreciate here.

70 - 79
Games that manage to keep mechanical, technical and design flaws to a minimum while providing a solid experience. Generally enough to satisfy but not impress fans or gamers outside the genre.

60 - 69
Games that manage to get it mostly right functionally, without ever really moving beyond that. Flaws present can still have an impact on the experience. Fans of the genre and more tolerant gamers can enjoy these titles.

50-59
Games that meet the minimum requirements of functionality, but just barely. Mechanical, technical and design problems are still present, though not to the point of complete unplayability. Only desperate fans would see value in these titles.

Below 50
Games that fail to meet even the most basic requirements of entertainment and competence with serious mechanical and/or design flaws. Avoid at all costs.



Ni no Kuni: The Wrath of the White Witch

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3 DEVELOPER: Level-5 PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai ESRB: T 10+

90/100

The JRPG We Always Imagined

When we first arrived at this current console generation way back in 2006, expectations from JRPG fans were high. There had been a flood of quality games, both from expected sources like Square Enix, and surprise upstarts like Atlus that gave fans of the genre a reliable, regular source of quality gaming. The bold experimentation of the *Persona* series, the grandiose efforts of *Final Fantasy* and even the flawed but stunningly ambitious space epic of *Xenosaga* all set a new high watermark for JRPGs that fans expected would be continued on the PS3 and Xbox 360 with the same frequency. That didn't happen. But every once in a while, a game comes out that brings that promise back to the genre and shows what happens when people who care really take advantage of the power of today's consoles. *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* is one of those games.

A Tale Of Sadness & Charm

Ni no Kuni is a collaboration between developer Level-5 and famed animation powerhouse Studio Ghibli, which means that the story is both simple and emotional. Young Oliver lives an idyllic life in a small American town when disaster strikes and he loses his mother in an accident. Unable to cope with his grief, his tears fall on a doll his mother supposedly made for him. The tears bring the doll to life and it reveals itself to be a cursed High Lord of Fairies, entreating Oliver to return with him to his parallel world to fight the oppression there and help that world's equivalent to his mother, possibly bringing his own mother back in the real world. With that, Oliver is off on a quest of the purest—and saddest—intentions, to bring his dead mother back to life. The story is strongly reminiscent of the timeless, fairy tale material that the best RPGs and Studio Ghibli itself have always featured, espousing old fashioned JRPG values like friendship and perseverance. It's all played straight, without irony or self-conscious winks at the quaintness of these values, which is a refreshing change from the usual dark, gritty narratives that have seemingly given up all hope on simple human decency and the power of kindness. *Ni no Kuni* sincerely believes in the inherent power of helping other people and it doesn't need an angst-ridden quest for vengeance to justify it.

Moving on to the visuals... where do I even start? For years now, quite a bit has been made of the unique graphical look of *Ni no Kuni* and the hype was completely justified. No other game currently available gives you the magical feeling that you're walking and interacting within a Studio Ghibli animated feature. Everything from *Porco Rosso* to *My Neighbor Totoro* is invoked for the knowledgeable Ghibli fans, but the real stunner here is the art direction. This is not a game about frame rates or polygon counts, though both of those elements actually represent themselves decently in *Ni no Kuni*. Instead, what really impresses is the choice of colours and the painstaking effort put into the cel shading technology here to create 3D characters that look frighteningly close to the stills of a Ghibli film whenever you pause the game. Environments look hand drawn, with careful, painterly attention to detail on everything from cobblestones to the wood work on a door. Character designs have the signature simplicity and expressiveness that Ghibli characters from Kiki to Arrietty have become famous for. Even though the game doesn't have the arsenal of lighting and post processing effects that have become associated with "quality" graphics, there's a life and charm to the entire world that stands toe to toe with the best graphics of today.

The audio is of similar calibre, with the music duties falling on the shoulders of Joe Hisaishi, the famed composer for many of Ghibli's features such as *Nausicaä and the Valley of the Wind*, *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*. He's backed by the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, which means that this Dolby Digital audio is pretty rich and quite pleasing for music fans with the speakers to do this justice. Similarly impressive is the voice acting, with Level-5 opting to include the original Japanese voice work as well as an English dub that goes above and beyond the call of duty. In order to capture the regional flavour of the original Japanese voice work, the English version runs the gamut of UK dialects for Welsh, British and other assorted, authentic accents to give the game more flavour than the usual American performance. It's all top notch stuff, and quite impressive for a JRPG.

A Love Letter To JRPGs Of The Past

If you're the sort of person that misses overworlds, simple tales of good versus evil, a more innocent gaming experience filled with wonder and even delight, then stop reading right now and run off to the store to buy *Ni no Kuni*. If you're the sort of person that believes all good games have the word "angst," "dark," or "gritty" somewhere in their description then this is something you'll want to beat your children with to ensure they have a joyless, self-pitying, navel gazing life.

Level-5 generated a lot of skepticism about this game after the surprisingly mediocre *White Knight Chronicles* series, which was even more uneven than their previous effort, the PS2 *Rogue Galaxy*. But this is the same company that gave us *Dragon Quest VIII*, arguably one of the best instalments of the franchise, and it seems like they've returned to that previous form for *Ni no Kuni*. This is, in many ways, an old school JRPG of the sort that hasn't really been seen since the 90s, or at least, Level-5's own *Dragon Quest VIII* in 2005. It brings back many of the mechanics and concepts of the JRPG that have been ignored for so long they actually feel new again. Rather than a series of confined dungeons separated by fast travel mechanisms, the traditional overworld makes a return, revealing massive landscapes that might hide forests, towns, dungeons and other secrets for the player willing to explore. Turn based battles also return, but now they have a little bit of Namco's own *Tales* series flavour, mixed in with some *Pokémon*. And of course, the usual JRPG tropes of grinding, escalating difficulty and an emphasis on The Power Of Friendship™ are all back in full force. All of this has been coated with the innocent, heart-felt glow of Studio Ghibli's sense of wonder.

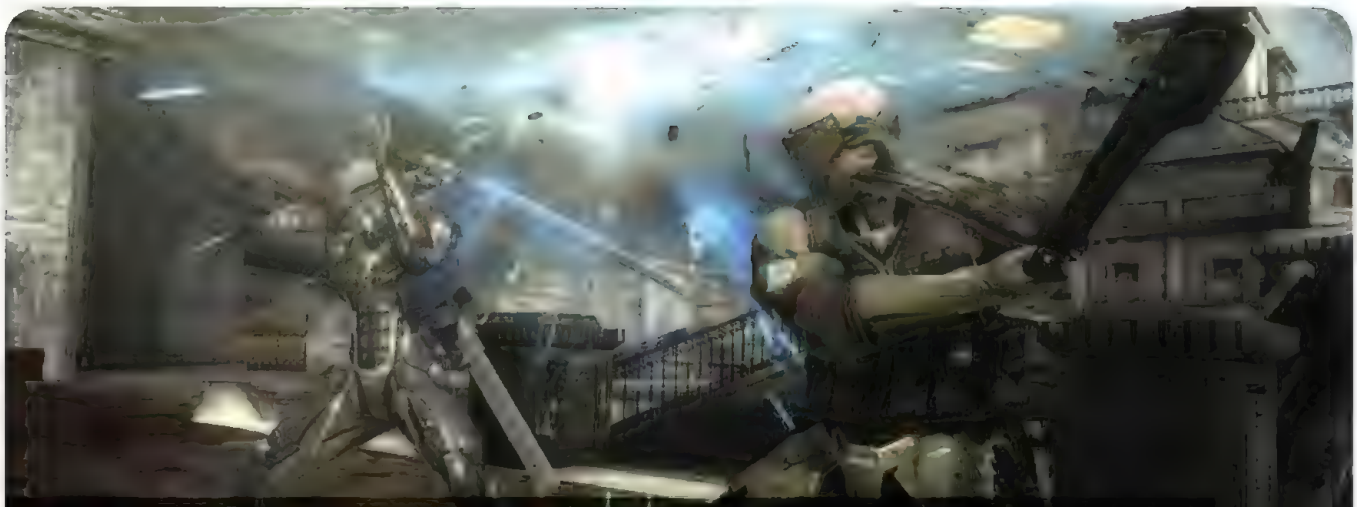
In what might be viewed as a mixed blessing to some, while the story, visuals and world of *Ni no Kuni* are all in line with the E10+ rating the game has earned, the gameplay does not. It may look like a kid's game, but it plays with an assumption that the person holding the controller is a veteran of the genre. This will be discouraging to children—perhaps even parents—who are looking at this game as a gentle introduction to JRPGs.

It's anything but that, which, for fans of the genre, is a godsend. Combat, for example, starts out simple, introducing the basics of its *Pokémon*-esque mechanics, but gradually ramps up to a single character controlling up to three "Familiars" at a time, including his/her own actions. This then gets doubly complicated with the addition of two other party members who also have their own arsenal of Familiars. The Familiar system itself is also substantial, with mechanics for catching a Familiar, feeding it, training it and metamorphosing it into a more powerful form with new abilities. Then there is the traditional Level-5 synthesis system, which makes its return this time in the form of a genie inhabiting a cauldron. Once again, hunting for ingredients, learning new "recipes" and experimenting with different combinations can yield different results.

Players will have plenty of time to come to grips with these meaty mechanics, because the game, like those JRPGs of yore, is freakin' huge. In addition to the main story and quest, there are literally dozens of sidequests that pop up with almost the same frequency as a typical Bethesda RPG, encouraging exploration, adding more character to the story and giving players the opportunity to do that most basic of JRPG strategies, grind. Yes, in true JRPG fashion, you won't be able to breeze through this game and fight the many bosses without putting in a little time to level up. The difficulty curve is always quite manageable if you play this game like a veteran and understand the game is meant to be a meandering experience, not a fast sprint to the finish. In that sense, *Final Fantasy XIII* with its more dumbed down, streamlined, action oriented mechanics might be a better fit for those uninitiated to the JRPG and unwilling to patiently learn the nuances. For those unafraid to do a bit of learning, *Ni no Kuni* offers a superior world, story and mechanics, but it demands a bit of patience and a willingness to learn its systems.

Having said that, *Ni no Kuni* might not be the type of game that every gamer—particularly FPS fans—can easily play, but it is a game that the entire family can enjoy. The struggle of Oliver is both accessible and by turns both genuinely heartwarming and positive in its themes. It's a substantial game that will take dozens of hours to complete, and for fans of the genre, it does what Square Enix JRPGs have thus far failed to do this generation; it gives the gamers what they've actually been asking for, rather than what the marketing department feels will sell in the West. The combat can be a bit tricky sometimes, even for veterans, and the story doesn't tread any new ground, but these are small quibbles in what is undoubtedly the best JRPG of 2013. The only real downside to this game is that the same in-depth mechanics that make it such a joy to genre fans also limits its accessibility to younger gamers, or those new to the genre. C&G

It's a substantial game that will take dozens of hours to complete, and for fans of the genre, it does what Square-Enix JRPGs have thus far failed to do this generation; it gives the gamers what they want



Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360 **DEVELOPER:** Platinum Games **PUBLISHER:** Konami **ESRB:** M

80/100

Real Men Wear Cybernetic High Heels

Hideo Kojima just won't give up on Raiden. After a somewhat dubious debut as an effeminate, angsty product of child soldier training in *Metal Gear Solid 2*, the fans cried out in dismay as Raiden took centre stage over Snake. Things took a turn for the surprising when Raiden returned in *Metal Gear Solid 4* as a bad ass cybernetic ninja who easily tore through the kind of mechanized foes that gave Solid Snake a run for his money. Now he's back in his own game, but with Kojima taking on more of a supervisory role. The game was handed off to Platinum Games, best known for *Bayonetta* and more recently, *Anarchy Reigns*. As to be expected, heads roll. And arms, legs, cybernetic spinal cords and the occasional torso.

PMCs Are Causing Trouble Again

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance takes place a few years after the events of *Metal Gear Solid 4*. The Patriots have been defeated, Snake makes no appearance whatsoever—though is obliquely referenced from time to time—and Raiden is now working with a "good" private military corporation, Maverick Security, which only does protection work, and NGO assistance, never taking on the role of invader or aggressor. Things go disastrously wrong when an African leader under Raiden's protection gets killed by some top class cyborg mercs, one of whom is good enough to cut off Raiden's arm and take out his left eye. Raiden, of course, recovers from this, and with a sense of burning humiliation and failed duty, he goes off to uncover the cyborg conspiracy and find out who's trying to snuff out the peaceful development of various nations and fan the flames of war once again. All the Kojima obsessions that you'd expect are here, from intensely researched future technology to musings about memes and the war economy. There's also the occasional bit of typical Japanese oddness, like robot wolves riding in cars and cyborgs in sombreros, but hey, it wouldn't be a Kojima game without the random blip of silliness here and there. It also wouldn't be a Kojima game without the pontificating, and although it's not taken to monolithic depths of something like *MGS4*, there's a lot of food for thought here, including a very surprising attack on the modern American value system and the first world in general. Staunch Republicans in America are likely to find themselves offended by some of the game's aggressive, liberal commentary, particularly in the final confrontation.

When we get to the visuals, we see a crisp, clean, good looking game that generally performs well. Unfortunately, Platinum's past difficulties with the PS3 rear their head here from time to time, so while the 360 version—which was used for review—maintains a steady framerate with little to no screen tearing, the PS3 version occasionally lags behind. We're not taking *Bayonetta* levels of lagging, but if you're a pure performance hound, the 360 version is the way to go. On the other hand, the cut scenes get much more breathing space on the Blu-Ray disc of the PS3 version, and so have higher detail and generally look sharper and better, whereas the 360 version can occasionally look a bit more muddled and jaggy. If you own both consoles, pick your poison, but single console owners can rest easy knowing that neither version is catastrophically crippled compared to the other.

The audio is generally strong, although there are a few eyebrow raising moments here and there. Quinton Flynn returns once again to voice Raiden, but his performance gets occasionally schizophrenic half-way

An action game in true Japanese tradition.

through the game; sometimes he sounds like Raiden and other times he sounds like Mark Hamill as the Joker trying to do an impression of Kevin Conroy as Batman. This is most evident during the numerous CODEC conversations that are de rigeur for a *Metal Gear* game. The music is also a bit of a departure from what MGS fans might expect. Instead of a barrage of orchestral arrangements mixed in with some cool synth compositions, the music fares more towards nü metal or even emo on occasion. It's also dynamic, with wailing, Dragonforce-esque guitars fading into the periphery when a fight is over, only to blare to life again when Raiden gets ambushed by more cyborgs. The actual audio effects are good, but not spectacular, never really taking full advantage of surround sound or working the subwoofer particularly hard. This isn't an FPS, so perhaps it's unfair to expect that kind of immersive aural soundscape, but with the number of explosions and sword clangs assaulting speakers, it feels like the audio could use a little bit more "oomph."

MGR:R uses arena-based combat, similar to *Bayonetta* and *DmC*, with an area being locked off, while a group of enemies attacks. Once they're cleared it's time to move to the next area. Platinum Games made *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish*, so you can pretty much expect how this game will play out based on those two titles. Just throw in a high frequency katana and we can call it a day. What this means, on a practical gameplay level, is that the controls are tight and precise, while the combat and combo system is fluid, vicious and very, very fast. This is the complete opposite of *Devil May Cry*. This is a game that is meant to be struggled through, practiced with and eventually mastered, rather than an immediate gratification power fantasy. That's not to say Raiden is a pushover when fighting enemies, but where it was actually hard to die in *DmC*, it's something that will occur with alarming regularity if you're not paying attention and staying focused in *MGR:R*.

This is a 3rd person action game in the fast, furious Japanese tradition. Not as hard as something like *Ninja Gaiden*, but it makes demands of the player, and when it comes time to confront a boss, the game gets harder, not easier. The combat here is more focused, centering on the use of a primary weapon—usually the sword—and

subweapons like EMP grenades and rocket launchers. As Raiden defeats bosses, their weapons become his to use opening up the possibilities for new battle styles. This isn't, however *Devil May Cry*, so the combo system here isn't based on weapon switching. Instead, the emphasis is on parrying attacks—with a slightly more generous than usual timing window to facilitate this—and the "Zandatsu," which is a holdover from the earlier, Konami developed version of the game that was ultimately scrapped. Zandatsu is Raiden's ability to slow time and enter a "rapid slashing" mode with his katana. When used under ordinary circumstances, this merely allows Raiden to get more hits in while an electrolyte meter ticks down the available slashing time that is left. In order to recharge this meter, Raiden needs to either attack normally, building up the meter with each hit, or find dropped vials of electrolytes as loot from foes. However, if Raiden should sufficiently beat up or parry an enemy enough, weak points appear—like limbs—that can be slashed off. More critically, the "heart" of Raiden's cyborg enemies contain the plasma he requires to heal himself. So combat is an ebb and flow of attacking or parrying opponents enough to reveal the weak point, then going in for the kill with Zandatsu to carve out the heart, rip it from the body and crush it in a brief cut scene.

As is usual with a Japanese action game, players are evaluated for their performance, going up to S Rank, and while some battles in certain levels are relatively reasonable in their demands for an S Rank, other areas will call for much more skill. Only very good players are going to attain an S Rank for an entire level, of which there are a total of only seven. This is something that players will definitely want to keep in mind if value for money is an issue. It's a short game, with an average play time of six to eight hours for less experienced players while veterans of the genre will complete it in considerably less. My final playtime according to my game save was only about five and half hours, and that was without skipping cut scenes and taking the time to listen to all the CODEC conversations. The flipside of this is that the game doesn't overstay its welcome and the pacing of combat and introduction of new enemies is very effective. Just when it seems like you've figured out the tactics for one foe, a new one comes up that demands learning even more about the combat system and upping your skill. There are no flat areas of the game where it feels like the pace starts to drag because it's throwing new things at you at a rapid pace and the short nature of the game prevents enemy repetition from overstaying its welcome.

The only real downsides to this game are the occasional wicked difficulty spike, especially when confronting bosses, and the secondary controls for Zandatsu which can put the player in a tight spot towards the end. The Zandatsu or "blade mode" has two means of control, either use the face buttons to slash horizontally and vertically, or use the left stick to move the camera, while using the right stick to control the angle of slashing. Keep in mind you're pulling the left trigger at the same time, so this becomes unwieldy and most players will ignore the manual mode in favour of the face buttons. Unfortunately, this manual mode becomes critical to surviving the final boss battle, which can throw players for a loop, being forced to learn a control style that they may have ignored thus far.

These criticisms aside, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* is an interesting, alternative take on the MGS world. The combat is fast and fun, the pacing is excellent, and there are enough nods to MGS that veterans of the series will feel right at home. Some difficulty spikes and a short campaign may mar the overall value of the game, but it's worth owning for action fans disappointed by *Devil May Cry's* style over substance. CGG

DmC: Devil May Cry

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360, PC **DEVELOPER**: Ninja Theory **PUBLISHER**: Capcom **ESRB**: M

77 /100

This Ain't Your Grandfather's Dante

Capcom took a pretty bold chance when they handed off one of their beloved franchises to British developers Ninja Theory. The *Devil May Cry* series was one of the most uniquely Japanese and hyper-kinetic 3rd person action games of the previous generation. With the transfer of the property to Ninja Theory, there was a lot of controversy, and even death threats directed at studio head Tameem Antoniades, for the suite of dramatic changes they were taking towards the franchise. Of course, all of this was done with Capcom's blessing in an attempt to reboot a hardcore action franchise for a new generation not-so-hardcore players. The end result is something interesting and enjoyable, but not the tightest, fastest action game around. Platinum—and *Bayonetta* in particular—have nothing to worry about.

A DMC Firmly In The Spirit Of The Teens

Alex Garland—most recently of *Dredd* fame—has crafted a story for the character of Dante that puts him firmly in the zeitgeist. A demon that rules the world through massive national debt, news outlets under the control of a demonic Bill O'Reilly, and Anonymous taking to the airwaves to stand against the demonic one per cent. It's like Garland and Ninja Theory took every single timely subject and stuck them in this plot to make sure it was "hip enough" for the kids. Dante is a surly, emo punk who spends most of his time fighting demons and having a lot of casual sex. Then he meets up with his long lost brother Vergil and finds out their parents were killed by a demon named Mundus, who currently controls the world through a mixture of finance, politics and media control. With a new, sudden burning desire for revenge, Dante sets himself up to take Mundus down.

In a nutshell, if you're new to the DMC franchise, you will probably love this game.

Aside from the fact that *DmC* will immediately date itself in a few years, it's clear that the story is the real star of the show here. This is not the comedic, cocky Dante of the original Japanese series that found himself in situations as ludicrous as they were dangerous. This is a deeply troubled Dante, with a dark personality and some real weight to him. Perhaps the best way to view this new reboot is as an "Elseworlds" or Marvel "What If" story. Purists are going to hate this new take with livid rage, it bears little to no resemblance to the Dante older players remember. On the other hand, for people that want a bit more depth to their characters, this Dante and the journey he undertakes, has more substance and complexity to it. Dante and Vergil are more fleshed out here in ways they never were in previous series. In that sense, Capcom has succeeded in trusting this property to Ninja Theory because this really is a Dante that's more relevant to a younger, more demanding audience.

Moving over to the visuals, we are presented with another Unreal engine game, but Ninja Theory has worked the engine over considerably. Rarely does Unreal's characteristic texture load-in rear its ugly head, and the frame rate stays stable through gameplay, though it noticeably stutters during some of the more resource intensive real time cut scenes. The art direction is quite distinct, with a bold array of colours and some monster designs that feel like call backs to the old DMC's piecemeal/clockwork assembled enemies. It's definitely a good looking game, with decent performance stability.

On the audio side, Ninja Theory has added Noisia and Beatport Band to the soundtrack, so if you've got a subwoofer attached to your TV, you're definitely going to be feeling a lot of bass. The acting and delivery of dialogue is definitely a step up from the usual DMC fare, although even the new Dante can't resist the occasional awful, 80s action hero one liner after disposing of some enemies. The game sounds good, and even though it doesn't necessarily have the same kind of audio immersion as an FPS, the music and weighty sound of the combat all contribute a polished audio experience.

The Call Of Duty Of DMC Games

In a nutshell, if you're new to the DMC franchise, you will probably love this game. If you're a veteran of the series, you will find this dumbed down.

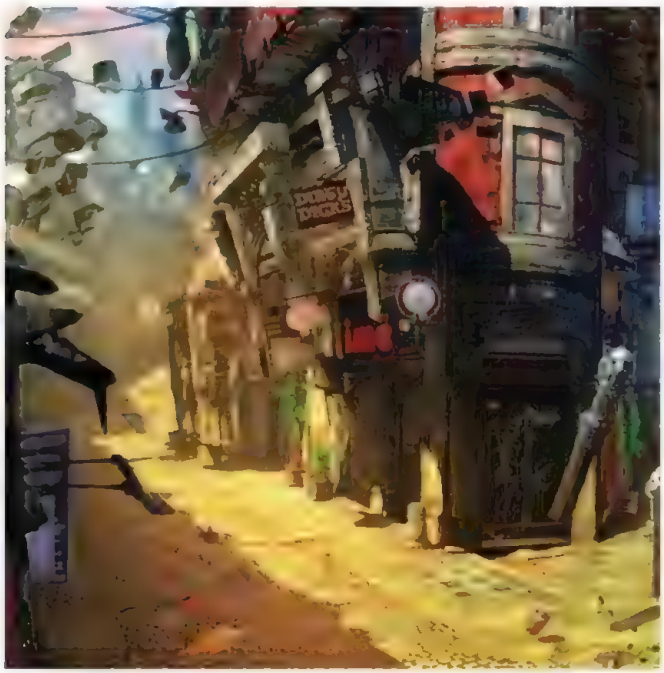
This is still a third person action game that relies on combos and rates your fights based on the variety of styles you employ. But both the combat engine itself has been slowed down to make executing combos easier, and the rating system has been made much more forgiving. Getting an "S Rank" for combat rounds is surprisingly easy, and the generous checkpoint system makes the use of the traditional *DMC* "Gold Idol" redundant, since continuing usually places you not far back from where you died.

For fans of the original series, a lot of nods to the combat are there. The sword is still called Rebellion, the pistols are still called Ebony & Ivory, and even combos like Stinger still have the same name as before. What's changed dramatically is the timing of the combos. *DMC* is about spectacular looking combat and as a result, they've become more generous with the input timing, and even slowed down the animation somewhat so you can really appreciate how bad ass these moves look.

Obviously, for purists, this is horrifying. But for people new to the franchise, particularly those used to the power fantasies of Western titles like *Call of Duty*, the game is quite compelling. The COD mentality has its appeal because it's empowering; players feel cool and untouchable when they play COD because the game wants you to feel like a killing machine. The original DMC only did that at the highest levels of player skill, a tradition carried on this generation by *Bayonetta* which is still one of the best action games of this generation even if it doesn't come anywhere near as close as the new DMC to providing a bad ass power fantasy. This is a Westernized version of a Japanese game for everyone who says that Japanese games are too hard and therefore no fun.

There is also more of a traversal aspect to the game that wasn't as prominent in past titles. Thanks to a suite of angelic and demonic weapons, Dante can now grapple objects to pull them towards him, or pull himself toward the target. It creates new options of aerial combos and plays an important part in the grapple/platform segments that bear a strong resemblance to *God of War*. The traversal elements feel fast and actually require a certain amount of coordination at times, though occasionally it feels like these levels go on a bit long to pad out the six to eight hour duration of the game. There are also secret missions to find, for bonus items and increasing your rating per level. And once the game is completed the traditional amped up DMC difficulty levels—like Dante Must Die mode—are unlocked.

So in the end, what are we left with? We have a bold new take on DMC that focuses more on the new—and interesting—lore than the traditional frenetic gameplay that the series is known for amongst hardcore gamers. Ninja Theory has made DMC accessible with a more considered rendering of the character and his world, and they've made the game more accessible for those who might not be able to pull off strings of precisely timed combos. Is this game worth your $60? If you're a purist who wants only the kind of tight, demanding combat of the old series, then no. If you've got an open mind and actually enjoy a more accessible game with an interesting story and some great acting, then yes. For the hardcore, this is not the game you've been waiting for, but it's likely that *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* is, since Platinum has taken the combat engine they're famed for from *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish* and given it to Raiden of the MGS universe. Personally, I found the trade-off that Ninja Theory made to be an interesting one, and while I'm not completely sold on the easier gameplay, I appreciate the weight and depth they've added to Dante's usually fluffy universe. CG



Reid McCarter's

A SECOND LOOK AT DmC

Ninja Theory's reboot of the series may feature imaginative visuals, a propulsive storyline and awe-inspiring action set pieces, but it also captures the spirit of Capcom's original games through snappy combat system mechanics and stellar character design. Exploring Dante's world via well-acted cinematics, platform jumping or ripping through demonic enemies is a delight, and the constantly changing level scenery keeps the game fresh throughout its running time. A smoother framerate and the ability to buff up graphical quality makes the PC release of *DmC* the best version to pick up (barring a decent computer and the gamepad that a combo-based action title all but requires). Regardless of platform, though, this is a game that deserves to be played.

Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3, PS VITA **DEVELOPER**: Sanzaru Games **PUBLISHER**: SCEA **ESRB**: E10+

85/100

Sly Is HD AND New This Time

Not too long ago, Sanzaru Games treated the gaming world to a pleasant surprise with the HD collection of the past *Sly Cooper* games. Once another mainstay of the PS2 era, this crime caper based, open world game was full of charm and fun, something that's been in short supply in the current generation. It turns out that HD port was just a lead up to Sanzaru taking over the reins of the franchise as the original developer, Sucker Punch, had their hands full with their new superhero franchise Infamous. A new developer taking on a cherished franchise from the past rightfully garners a lot of skepticism. Fortunately, this is one of those times when that skepticism is wrong.

The Gang's All Here

Sly Cooper: Thieves In Time is a direct continuation of the existing series. Sly himself is "retired" having faked amnesia at the conclusion of the last game in order to finally get into a relationship with Interpol Inspector Carmelita Fox. Unfortunately his itch for heists rises again, and the perfect excuse to jump back into the action arises when the pages of the "Thievius Racoonus,"—the legacy of his thief family-line, with all their trade secrets—starts losing pages thanks to some time traveling hijinks. Sly and the gang reunite in order to travel back in time to stop whoever it is that's trying to destroy the Cooper line through time paradoxes, and the game gets underway. Storywise, Sanzaru have mostly acquitted themselves. The plot of *Thieves in Time* is still just as fun and ludicrous as past games, although the Sanzaru writers are now officially in the running with *Ni no Kuni's* localizers for the 2013 Most Shameless Use Of Puns award. The dialogue isn't always as snappy as past games, but most of the time, it rings true and can still elicit a laugh or a chuckle.

Visually, *Thieves in Time* may play tricks on the eyes thanks to the unreliable lens of nostalgia. The Sly Cooper games have always used a simpler, cel shaded graphic style and for people that haven't looked at the games for a while, it's easy to say "This looks pretty much like the old games on the PS2." It doesn't. The level of detail and polygon counts of the characters and environments all benefit from the PS3's increased power. All the characters have gotten tweaked for HD with little accents like Ratchet's fur, or the seams in Murray's mask and gloves. It is bright and colourful and really shows off just how good cel shading can look with today's consoles. On the other hand, it's also not entirely stable in the performance department. There are moments of slight lagging in the framerate, and they happen with some regularity. There's also significant amount of loading whenever starting up new missions or entering and exiting the starting hub of any level. None of this is game breaking by any stretch, but it does take some of the shine off the presentation.

The sound, on the other hand, is good all the way through. The most important element was the voice actors, and Sanzaru managed to get the original trio to return for the voices of Sly, Murray and Bentley. Their performances are just as warm and silly as players remember and add a lot of laughs and entertainment to the experience. The biggest thumbs up though, has to go to the music. Peter McConnell, who also scored the second and third games deserves a lot of credit for the uniqueness and panache of his score for *Thieves in Time*. It's still consistent with what's come before, working off a base inspired by upbeat, big band jazz characteristic of

the early 60s—think *The Incredible* with its emphasis on brass for the less musically inclined—but the time travel motif allows McConnell to work in a lot of other styles from various periods and cultures and weave that into the jazz. It sounds absolutely fantastic and is one of the most distinct soundtracks of the year, using an orchestra in way that most games don't. The audio effects on the other hand, are pure old school. Sanzaru didn't mess with the original effects, so all the familiar cues for sneaking, picking up health or the ever present hum of the binocucom are all exactly the way players remember.

Capers & Hijinks

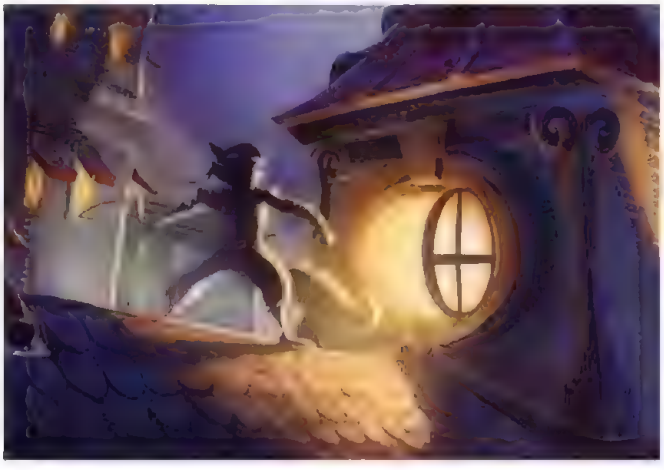
Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time is a safe game. There hasn't been a new game in the franchise for eight years, and it seems like Sanzaru didn't want to rock the boat with this newest iteration. All the lessons learned in the last few games have taken root here, the emphasis on stealth, the progression of a caper from scouting the location and formulating a plan to the multi-part execution that requires all team members to do their part. Fans of the series will feel right at home with the controls which still operate exactly the way they did in past games. There isn't anything particularly revolutionary about the game and it doesn't advance the franchise by leaps and bounds with innovation. Instead, it focuses on what the series does best—a sense of adventure, exploration, crime capers and laughs—and gussies it all up with new HD graphics and sound.

For those unfamiliar with the *Sly Cooper* formula, the structure of the game is always focused on heists and/or capers. Levels consist of a small but packed open world, and a central goal that usually involves stealing something from a criminal. Different characters will have different duties in pursuit of this goal, such as Sly's initial scouting missions to get photos and recon information for Bentley, or Murray's wading into the middle of a huge brawl to defeat the hordes of hired muscle, or Bentley hacking a system so as to disable the more dangerous security measures. Often these missions are presented in the "hideout" all at once, so players can tackle mission objectives in any order they like before completing the final heist that results in a boss fight. In addition to all the missions, there's a ton of collectibles scattered around, the gathering of which can yield rewards which may be purely cosmetic, or enhancements to gameplay such as damage reduction or adding treasure to the radar and map screens. The structure and core mechanics of *Sly Cooper* had been slowly iterated upon by the time the series got to *Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves* and Sanzaru decided not to mess with the established formula, sticking true to the pacing and fun the series had garnered a reputation for.

That's not to say that Thieves in Time is completely bereft of new ideas. Disguises, which had played a part in earlier games, now become a new mechanic for traversing levels. As Sly travels to new time periods and assists his various Cooper ancestors, he acquires costumes that have unique abilities, such as being fire proof, or slowing time. These abilities come into play during story missions, and are also used to acquire the more secluded, out-of-the-way treasures scattered around each level.

However, the most surprising thing about *Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time* might be the sheer value of the purchase. The game will take over 10 hours for the average player, considerably more for people who are treasure hunting or pursuing a platinum trophy. That's pretty decent for a $60 game, but much more impressive for a $40 game, which is what it's for its debuts on retail. To further add to the value, a new purchase of the game automatically includes a free, downloadable version for the Vita, meaning it's a buy-one-get-one free bonus for owners of the Vita, enabled with the "cross-play" function. That means players can save their progress on the PS3, then download that same save to their Vita version and continue on exactly where they left off, then upload that progress back on the PS3 later in the day.

To sum up, *Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time* is a successful, albeit safe, sequel from its newest developer, Sanzaru Games. Some technical issues mar the experience, but for fans of the series that just want more of the same, they'll get it in spades with this latest sequel. It's charming, fun, and has enough explanations of the backstories that even people new to the franchise can jump in, and at $40 for a cross compatible version, it's hard to argue the value here. CG



ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360, PC, Wii U **DEVELOPER**: Gearbox Software **PUBLISHER**: SEGA **ESRB**: M

67 / 100

Is This Gonna' Be A Stand Up Fight, Or A Bug Hunt?

Few films have burned themselves into the delicate, collective pop culture consciousness of the 80s generation the way *Aliens* did. A blend of teasing, seductive science fiction, primal horror, and the kind of gun blazing action that only an 80s director would find plausible, it became the high watermark that every other SF/Action film would aspire to. Naturally, this was also the case in games. Marines and H.R. Giger's alien have been going toe to toe digitally as far back as 1986's *Aliens: The Computer Game* for the Commodore 64 by Activision. Now, in 2013, we finally get our hands on a game by self-confessed fans Gearbox Software, who've been wowing crowds with *Borderlands*. It's a no brainer, this game should rock, right?

A Xenomorph May Be Involved

You play Corporal Winters, a marine with the USS Sephora who—17 weeks after the distress call was received—is now investigating the derelict USS Sulaco orbiting above LV-426. Yup, somehow the ship that was last seen ejecting Ripley and crew towards Fiornia-161 is back at the infamous planet where it all began with barely any explanation. Winter and his fellow marines board the ship ready to kick ass and take names and... Well, no surprises for what happens next. The story and characters are flat, basically giving Gearbox an excuse to invoke moments from Aliens for the benefit of the player. The plot makes no sense, and seems to exist solely as a rationale to shepherd players from one fan-service moment to the next. That's great for the people just want to be part of the world, but makes for narrative that never actually pulls people in.

The presentation however, is where some people are going to start feeling very sad. On the technical side, this game has been in development since 2006 and it shows. It looks like a mid-generation game, rather than the hyper-optimized graphical spectacles we're used to seeing this late in the generation. Unreal Engine 3 shows all its usual flaws; blurry textures, levels of detail taking too long to load, some screen tearing and the occasional drop in frame rate. Animation is also occasionally weak, particularly with the movements of the aliens themselves, and there are collision glitches with guns sticking out through doors and other technical gaffes you'd expect from a B-List developer. Normally this would be the time to say the game lacks polish and needed another year, but it already had over six, so that's no excuse.

On the other hand, the art team absolutely nailed the look of Aliens. Blurry textures aside, wandering around the Sulaco hanger reveals all the details a fan pausing the movie would expect to see, and Hadley's Hope is chock full of little touches like nearly empty sentry turrets and specimen canisters bathed in eerie light. The art team clearly loved *Aliens* and it shows in the detail and authenticity. The same holds true with the audio where the sound of the M-41A pulse rifle going off, or the foreboding "ping" of the motion tracker sound phenomenal. The sound track invokes both Jerry Goldsmith's *Alien* score and James Horner's more militaristic score for *Aliens*. If nothing else, the sound team has nothing to be ashamed of. The same can't be said of the design team. Lance Henriksen and Michael Biehn also return to reprise their roles, and they sound they do a workman-like job with the material they have.

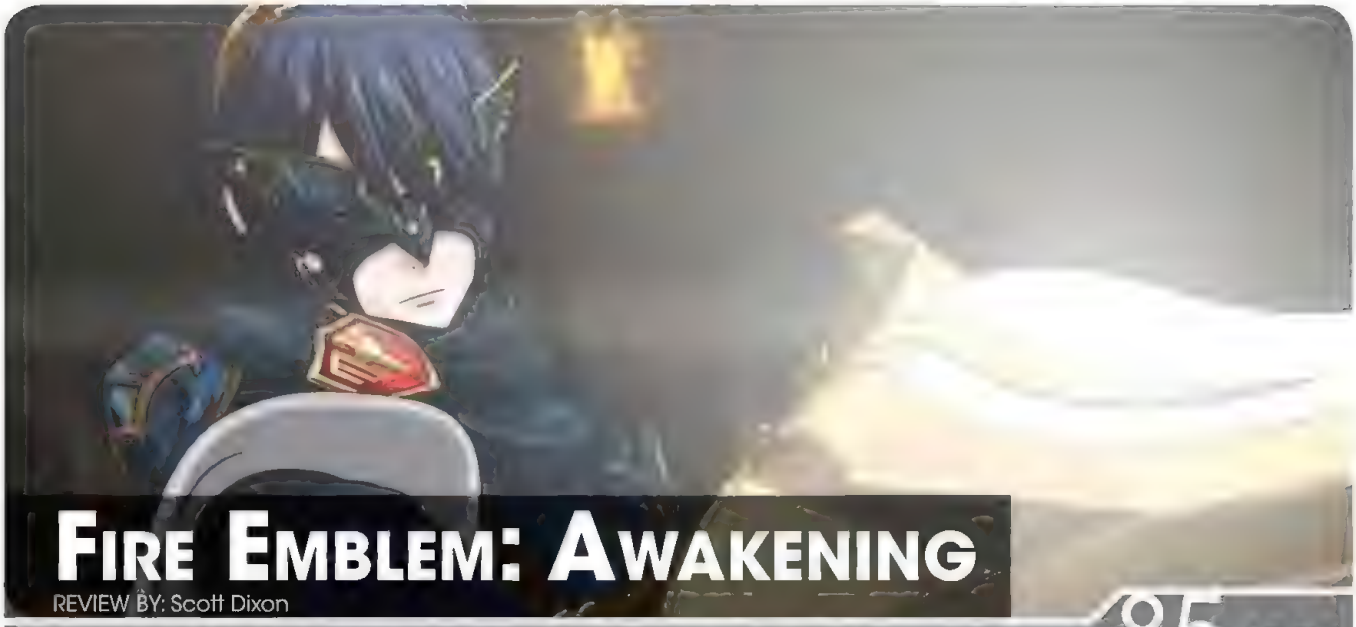
It's A Bug Hunt

The campaign is flat out mediocre. Dodgy AI makes for aliens that simply charge at you, while uninspired level design creates run of the mill gun battles that only draw appreciation for their visual fidelity to the source material. NPCs are a constant, but they are useless *and* indestructible, meaning they barrel into a fight and inadvertently act as meat shields. Some fights can actually be completed by simply hiding in a corner and letting the NPCs do all the work. The chief disappointment in the campaign is the lack of fear. Rather than emulate *Dead Space* which perfected the paranoia of being in a derelict craft with things trying to kill you, Gearbox defaulted to *Call of Duty*. The aliens aren't a threat, they're target practice, and players don't feel vulnerable, they feel almost invincible. This runs completely counter to the tone of the Alien franchise, but someone, either Sega or Gearbox, must've felt COD's power fantasy success was more important than staying true to the source material's intention. It's not a bad shooter, it's not broken, but it's not exciting and occasionally feels dull. Even co-op, which Gearbox showed a mastery of in *Borderlands* doesn't have all the conveniences, bells and whistles of Gearbox's big success, like simply being able to orient a local split-screen to a vertical split. Again, co-op feels rushed and unpolished despite all the years they had to perfect it.

The art team has absolutely nailed the look of Aliens.

The multiplayer side of things is where most of *ACM's* entertainment value lies. There's standard team deathmatch, as well as a mode called "Extermination" which is basically King of the Hill, but the two stand-out modes are "Escape" in which marines try to escape a complex, and "Survivor" where marines take a stand in a fort structure while awaiting dropship evac. In these cases, each marine is only allotted one life, no respawns, the aliens, under the control of players, finally bring the anxiety and dread that was lacking from the campaign. It's still not perfect, and the alien controls in particular can get quite wonky, but these modes feel like *Aliens*.

In the end, it's hard to recommend this game at the current price of $60. The single player campaign is mediocre and completely fails the spirit of the franchise. The multiplayer is an improvement, but could use more work and more focus since it succeeds where the campaign fails. If you want an interactive, 3D tour of the world of *Aliens* with some surprisingly fun multiplayer thrown in, get this now. If you wanted a game that played like *Aliens* and felt like it, keep your money in your wallet, unless you're a huge multiplayer fan. CG



Fire Emblem: Awakening

REVIEW BY: Scott Dixon

SYSTEM: 3DS DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems PUBLISHER: Nintendo ESRB: T

85/100

First party knockouts like *Fire Emblem* are something that Nintendo really needs to concentrate on. While we're drowning in near weekly Nintendo Direct conferences - which promise big and apologise for letdowns - the real answer to Nintendo's now self-admitted problem is sitting in the 3DS of gamers everywhere. *Awakening*, like its franchise predecessors, is an example of a game that moves platforms. Not everything is right in the chivalrous world of Paladins and Falco Knights, but every genre fan and 3DS owner would be well served by playing *Fire Emblem*. Nintendo would also do well to release more games of the quality found here, and paying close attention to the success *Fire Emblem: Awakening* will surely bring them.

Unwavering

After over 20 years of titles where the core concept of turn-based strategy has remained almost untouched, *Awakening* shows an iterative design philosophy honed to a near razor's edge. Having seen a Japanese release in early 2012, the wait and localization time has been very kind to *Awakening*.

Taking my avatar through the very long, very convoluted story was simple fun. A lot of the enjoyment of this game will come from the long dialogue sequences between key battles and while the voice work within these games is fine, it's often limited to repeated character specific catch-phrases and never expanded upon. It is however, through these scenes that the story is given the breadth it needs to really stand out and be a mentionable addition to the experience. While starting off as a power fantasy, the difficulty ramps up very quickly. Before you know it your characters will be dropping left and right, for good - which leads to the biggest, and most controversial game changer.

Casual Fun

Your hand is held for the first hour or so of the game - but from there you're on your own, and (in typical *Fire Emblem* style) thing falls apart very quickly. The game made no hesitation in going straight for the jugular, and started cutting down any party members it could. This has always been the style of *Fire Emblem*, but for the sake of my sanity and the need to actually finish this game - I had to restart *Awakening* after continually failing on the fourth stage. This time (shamefully) using the newly introduced 'casual mode'. Casual mode brings with it (aside from easier enemies) the removal of the franchise staple of permanent death. Sacrilege to the diehard; its removal could be seen as changing a 20 year old proven mechanic - but when a game is as potentially impermeable as *Fire Emblem* is - it is an excellent way to get more people to play this game.

When it comes down to it *Awakening* shines the most in its turn-to-turn gameplay. While the pace can be muddied by slow turns of preparing battles and moving units - it's all a calm build up to the great chess-like battle sequences the series pivots around.

Strong, confident and self-assured - Fire Emblem Awakening is the best reason to own a 3DS right now.

For The Record

Strong, confident, and self-assured - *Fire Emblem: Awakening* is the best reason to own a 3DS right now. It is games like this that Nintendo fans want. While Nintendo treads water with teasers of new games and what's to come - the solution to their issue is assuredly found in the competency of their first party games. The only problem is that it took five years for this game to be released since the Wii release of *Radiant Dawn* in 2007.

I have always thought that the *Fire Emblem* gameplay loop is best served by the hand-held platform - and *Awakening* only goes to solidify this point in my mind even more. I was on the edge of my seat the entire time, and even though only one or two turns would pass by in half an hour of gameplay - it satisfied both my primal fantasies of medieval violence and that more cerebral itch that has been recently sated by games like XCOM: Enemy Unknown. Play this if you can - you'll love it. CG

Dead Space 3

REVIEW BY: Brendan Frye

SYSTEM PS3, Xbox 360, PC **DEVELOPER** Visceral Games **PUBLISHER** EA **ESRB** M

73 / 100

Horror in videogames has been a hard thing to do well. Once accomplished, however, it can yield fantastic results. *Dead Space* was a game that managed to straddle that line between horror and action, allowing the player to experience feelings of dread yet still give enough tools to overcome the hell that has surrounded them. Unfortunately, the series has been on a downward trajectory since that first landmark instalment. It is sad to see this trend continue with the latest title. The largest, most feature-packed in the series, *Dead Space 3* sadly lacks much of what made the first game so strong. Pair that with a powerful arsenal and co-op, and all feelings of powerlessness are removed, leaving a well-built but ultimately flawed action shooter.

The story of DS3 centers around the series protagonist, Issac Clark, who is living with the ramifications of the events from the first two games; the weight of the people he has lost, along with the reality that he is powerless to stop the Markers, or the Necromorphs it creates. With the world set into chaos and his former girlfriend, Ellie lost in deep space, it is up to him and a team of soldiers to stop the extinction of mankind and save the woman he loves.

The story works well in developing the lead protagonist, as Issac feels much more fleshed out this time around. Moving from the nearly silent protagonist of the first game to a character with depth was a necessary move for the series. His motivations and pain at all that was lost, feel real. He is a man that has lost countless friends and seen how hopeless reality can be. These experiences have broken him and, in my opinion, make him feel relatable. He is not a nameless drone built for killing, but rather a man who has landed in a situation that he wants to escape.

The first instinct is to feel sorry for Issac, but the game thwarts this instinct at every turn. Shaping Issac into a walking tank as players work their way through the game takes away this feeling of fear. Little can stop Issac, and as the game progresses this becomes more and more evident. The empowerment of the player only detracts from the impact that the story is trying to convey. Horror works when the feeling of helplessness is always present; the world that was once known is now foreign and personal safety is in jeopardy. Since this formula is disrupted with a nearly indestructible character, much of this impact is lost. Although it makes a fun action romp, it no longer has the gut-wrenching terror it had at one time.

This is never more true than with the addition of drop-in/Drop-out co-op. Visceral has done a fantastic job implementing the feature. It gives the option of players to experience the game from a different prospective, and gives life to an important NPC. Sadly, although done well, the idea of co-op takes away the core element of lonely fear that makes the series so interesting. It becomes a well-built shooting gallery, more akin to games like *Borderlands* than a horror masterpiece.

Despite these issues, Visceral has made many improvements to the core aspects of the game. Weapon crafting has been refined this time around. Gone are the cumbersome nodes used in *Dead Space 2*. Resources found around the world are the new method of upgrading weapons, armour and abilities. These resources are easy to come by, as they are found with every slain enemy and scattered around the landscape.

I found trying out new weapon combinations and fitting them to my play style was fun and engaging. New parts were always fun to experiment with, seeking ways to create the best mix of power and speed. There is a limit of two guns, yet the ability to break down these

weapons without consequence made experimentation very rewarding. Throw in the ability to trade the blueprints of the guns you have constructed and you are left with a well-conceived and executed crafting system .

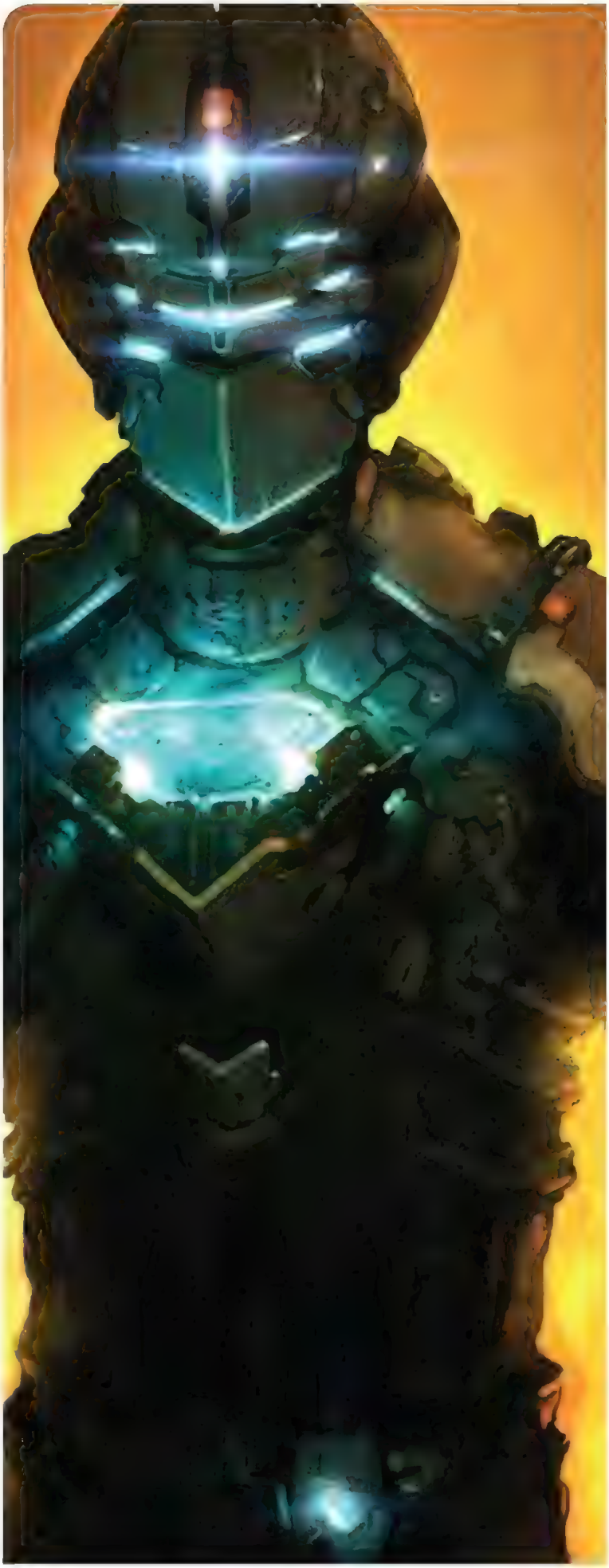
This is where the micro-transaction nature of the game also rears its ugly head. Players are given the choice to buy resources with real world money from the start of the game. These resources could be a new set of gun parts, new items for upgrades or even new armour. Although these do not take away from the core gameplay experience, and are not a concern after three hours of game play, it does reek of a cash grab. The trend suggests that these sorts of options will soon become the norm, but it would have been better if EA found a way to include them in a less obnoxious way.

Poor pacing and questionable mechanics make *Dead Space 3* feel more like a serviceable action title rather then anything revolutionary in the horror genre.

Length and design are other areas Visceral could have improved for this instalment. Longer and more bombastic then previous titles, the games feels padded. The pace and sense of alienation was what made the first game, and in some part the second game, so good. They moved well, mixing moments of tension with moments of action, never leaving the player in one area too long. *Dead Space 3*, sadly, feels like a greatest hits mix tape of moments from the previous titles. If you have played any of the previous games, you will recognize scenes lifted from those titles.

The thing that kills the suspense for me in any horror story, is when the author extends beyond what's necessary. It breaks the sense of urgency and makes what could be a tense story into something bloated and drawn out. This is the case with *Dead Space 3*. The beginning third of the game moved at a brisk pace, giving new locations and objectives as you moved from place to place. It is a shame that once you reach the ice planet all this pacing and urgency comes to an abrupt halt. Pacing is thrown out the window as the player is forced to slog through dull locations and recycled designs for the remainder of the game.

At its core, *Dead Space 3* is a solid horror title. Great aesthetic choices and compelling characters make me want to like the game more than I do. But poor pacing and questionable mechanics make it feel more like a serviceable action title rather than anything revolutionary in the horror genre. CG



Borderlands 2: Sir Hammerlocks Big Game Hunt

REVIEW BY: Wwayne Santos

SYSTEM PS3, Xbox 360, PC **DEVELOPER** Gearbox **PUBLISHER** 2K Games **ESRB** M

75 / 100

It's hard to believe that we're already on the third substantial piece of downloadable content for *Borderlands 2*. The game is a definite winner in the Value For Money category, and this new piece of content just adds to the value. This time out, the game brings back Sir Hammerlock and throws players into big, wild, untamed swamps and jungles to do a little hunting, a little shooting of natives and even a little bit of killing of evil mad scientists. Just another day in Pandora, then.

Of the pieces of DLC released thus far, this is probably the smallest in terms duration and content. As is standard now for *Borderlands 2* DLC, there is a new raid boss included and plenty of new enemies appear.

As to be expected, there's a lot of fun and humour to be had in this new content, and more opportunities for rare loot. But the shorter length means that some may not find the same amount of value in this as previous pieces of DLC. That's obviously not an issue for those that bought a season pass and can automatically download it, but if you've been buying this content one piece at a time, so as to avoid the weaker additions, then comparatively speaking, this may be the weakest piece to appear thus far.

This is not helped by the fact that Gearbox is long, long overdue on raising the level cap for the game. This in no way impacts the actual fun and design of *Big Game Hunt*, which shows a lot of effort in its creation of new environments, enemies and vehicles to engage with, but it may kill the motivation for some gamers to come back for more.

Max Payne 3: Deathmatch Made in Heaven

REVIEW BY: Phil Brown

SYSTEM PS3, Xbox 360 **DEVELOPER** Rockstar **PUBLISHER** Rockstar **ESRB** M

78 / 100

Well, it's a sad/glorious day for fans of the alcoholic sharpshooter known as Max Payne. After an epic cinematic comeback last year, we've finally reached the end of the road for *Max Payne 3* with a final DLC pack.

It's all fairly standard death match stuff, but the bullet time dynamic was enough to make it feel a little different and a hell of a lot of fun. The biggest new addition in the *Death Match Made In Heaven* package is a new mode called Dead Man Walking. This is a two player co-op that places you in an arena with a buddy to face waves of villains and survive as long as possible. News helicopters watch and comment, while the radar is turned off so that you'll never know where those gangsters are until you've got a bullet in your neck. Die and you'll be "kidnapped," tied up, and left for your partner to rescue. The game keeps going until both of you are dead. There are two maps with items, power-ups, and extra rooms that can be unlocked. I admit I probably enjoyed this more than the death match mode because it felt more like a pure *Max Payne* experience.

The other three multiplayer modes in this pack are all for death matches. There's Run and Stun in which one player plays as the big green lizard thing Saci and tries to convert every other player to his team by killing them; Marked Man in which Vendetta victories are worth five times as many points; and Time Attack which awards extra points the faster you kill enemies within streaks. The DLC pack is definitely worth picking up for Dead Man Walking alone, which is a fantastic addition to online Max Paynin'.

SKYRIM DRAGONBORN

REVIEW BY: Brittany Vincent

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360, PC **DEVELOPER**: Bethesda Softworks **PUBLISHER**: Bethesda Softworks **ESRB**: M

90 / 100

The allure of *Skyrim* has always been the ability to "speak" to dragons, and the *Dragonborn* DLC enhances and expands upon this concept in several ways. This DLC packs a 10 + hour wallop, side-quests not included, and it's certainly a larger departure than the bite-sized and inconsequential *Hearthfire*. Solstheim is rife with additional dungeons, mystery, and best of all, dragons.

Solstheim (part of Morrowind) is home to Dark Elves, who very recently fell to a chaotic volcano's eruption, which has coated the land and most of the sky with volcanic ash. For this reason it's a welcome change of pace from the typical Skyrim decor as well as the high fantasy sights and sounds. Apocrypha is home to plenty of special books that offer bonuses and stat boosts to existing perks and are quite beneficial to uncover.

All the world feels as though it's yours to command while you're zipping around through the air on your dragon, and it's truly a sight to behold. Those looking for *Skyrim* to fully live up to its potential will find plenty to love here.

Dragonborn also packs a wallop with its meaty narrative and multiple story quests and errands. Even if you've bottomed out with the main game's content, there's easily 10 hours or more of extra-beefy content to sink your teeth into, enough to justify the price and the download.

If the *Skyrim* well has finally run dry for you and you're looking for effective ways to extend your time in the world, *Dragonborn* is the best DLC choice by far -- at least, for now. Bend dragons to your will to your heart's content, and fly off into the sunset. You've earned it!

CGM PREVIEW

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US

Words by: Melanie Emile

What if Ed Boon got his hands on world renowned superheroes/villains? Well it happened before and will happen again with *Injustice: Gods Among Us*. This time players won't be able to pit Sub-Zero against Batman, they'll battle a variety of DC characters against one and other; Nightwing, Green Arrow and Solomon Grundy just to name a few. The roster mainly consists of power characters, made of brute strength and gadget based characters, full of items.

Running on the Unreal Engine 3, *Injustice* presents two control schemes, a traditional *Mortal Kombat* set up, as well as *Street Fighter* catered approach (quarter, half circles). There is also the integration of the character trait button, connected to the trait meter, enabling players to perform unique character tricks. Harley Quinn's spawns a random attack item and Batman's will summon little robo-bats. Alongside the trait meter, there is the four sectioned super meter. This meter will charge by dealing combos or taking blows, and once charged players can perform enhanced special moves or super powered special attacks, like punching someone into the stratosphere as Superman. Players will also be able to gamble away portions of their meter during a character clash, a combo breaking mechanic. While there are no fatalities to mercilessly end the opponent with, there are character unique supermoves. While early speculation was there would be a lack of blood, Ed Boon has said "It's going to be a pretty brutal experience."

An aspect to highlight about *Injustice* is the extremely interactive stage designs. Players have the ability to interact with many objects in a stage, as well on different levels of a stage. Shoot the opponent with the Batmobile, then punch him through the floor(standard MK technique), fight him into the elevator and start all over again!

The Book of Five Rings: A Graphic Novel

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

Publisher: Shambhala Publications **Released:** Nov 13, 2012 **Price:** $12.95 CAD

70 / 100

The Book of Five Rings is an adaptation, not an original story. It's the graphic rendering of the original text by the same name, penned by Miyamoto Mushashi, a master swordsman of feudal Japan. He fought his first duel at the age of 13 and proceeded to never lose a fight for the rest of his life, or so goes the historical recounting. In his twilight years, this self-taught sword master finally wrote a short collection of essays on his thoughts about combat and philosophy. That book is revered and reread in Japan in the same way as China's own Sun Tzu and *The Art of War* is still looked on as tactically sound even by businessmen of today. With that background in mind, it should be obvious that *The Book of Five Rings* is not a samurai epic, or typical action-packed manga adventure.

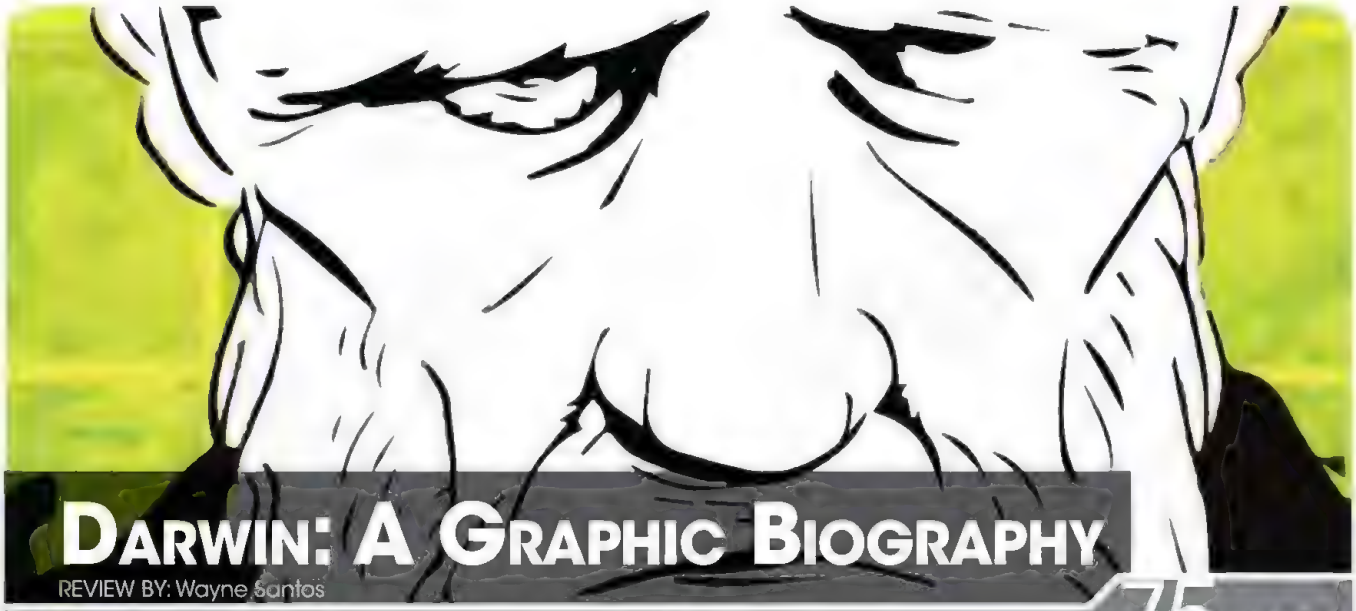
Rather than simply try to illustrate the teachings of the book, the writer, Sean Michael Wilson, has chosen instead to take ideas that Mushashi lectures about, and interweave this with moments from his own life. This is understandable, since narrating a straight up philosophical treatise lacks any of the conventional structure modern readers expect from a story. There's still no real central conflict or antagonist here, but at least with an element of biography there's a sense of progression from Mushashi's younger, more martial life to his older twilight years when he embraced the arts and the need to preserve his knowledge.

There is an obvious respect on the part of Sean Michael Wilson in his treatment of the material, based on a translation by William Scott Wilson. The priority here is to succinctly communicate the essential ideas of each chapter in Mushashi's philosophy. What the comic may lack in traditional narrative structure it makes up for with relatively easy to digest philosophical ideas. It's text heavy, with the emphasis being weighted in favour of the ideas being presented rather than the visuals.

The art work, as provided by Japanese expatriate to the UK Chie Kutsuwada is a simpler, leaner style. Anyone that was expecting the intricate renderings of someone like Hiroaki Samura of *Blade of the Immortal* fame is in for disappointment. Like the text itself, the art work is functional, preferring clean, simple lines and angles to illustrate ideas or the occasional duel. Kutsuwada's work is functional, never flamboyant, and skews towards a slightly younger audience in terms of look.

On the whole, this is a worthwhile read for people who aren't afraid to educate themselves. Yes, the book is "dry" compared to traditional manga histrionics, but there are also valuable, important ideas here that can be carried out on a daily basis, not just in combat situations. For anyone that has ever romanticized the idea of being a Japanese swordsman, it's quite enlightening to read the actual ideas of one of the most revered martial artists Japan has produced to see exactly what he thought of combat and the path to victory. Perhaps most surprising of all for the unfamiliar will be Mushashi's emphasis on "misdirection," concentrating not so much on a strict, disciplined style so much as keeping the enemy off balance and preventing him from being an effective combatant.

While not everyone is going to run out and pick up a comic based on a meditation of Japanese swordsmanship, those that do will find that the dreaded word "educational" has some real merit here. There's no escalating stakes or smirking villains to hate, but for those willing to hear out ideas, particularly those focused on the idea of taking down your enemy in the most efficient manner possible, there's are valuable—if slow paced—ideas here worth reading. There's a reason that many prominent Japanese successes still return to the original text and read it again on an annual basis. Now is your chance to find out why in comic book form. C&G



Darwin: A Graphic Biography

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

Publisher: Smithsonian Books **Released**: Feb. 5, 2013 **Price**: $9.95 CAD

75 / 100

History Illustrated

Yes, it's another biographical comic, this one focusing on that most important of researchers to modern biological science, Charles Darwin, aka the father of the theory of evolution. Like our other bio-comic piece this issue *The Book of Five Rings*, this is a comic that is more about learning than it is about slam-bang, capes n' tights fisticuffs. As a result, the educational slant is going to drive away a lot of people, but that would be a shame since ideas are important, and this book entertainingly presents some of the most important ideas of biology today.

The writer, Eugene Byrne, frames his story in cartoony fashion, with a nature documentary—complete with presenters—who just happen to be talking apes. It's an interesting choice, and probably one made for younger readers, since the actual biographical elements are played pretty straight. However, the use of a couple of TV personalities, simian or otherwise, keeps up a banter of two distinct voices going, which adds tremendously to keeping the otherwise dry biographical material and scientific theory lively and engaging. It's one thing, after all to have someone lecture you about the theory of evolution, but it's another thing entirely to have two people arguing about it, and Bryne has made a wise choice in his use of narrative devices.

The comic, as one would expect from the title, chronicles the life of Charles Darwin, although unlike much of the material focusing on him, this comic takes the time to look at his youth. We don't just learn about Darwin's famous voyage on the Beagle to the Galapagos archipelago, we learn about his childhood, his struggle to come to terms with what his father wanted versus his own burgeoning interest in naturalism, and the aftermath of his theory of evolution as he discovered he wasn't the only one coming to this conclusion.

What's most impressive about this comic is the wealth of complex information it manages to distill into digestible chunks for younger, or simply less patient, readers that ordinarily wouldn't take the time to sift through a lot of dry text. The life of Charles Darwin is fascinating to read, but just as important is the unbiased, balanced presentation of the theory of evolution and the arguments against it. There is a *lot* of material to digest here, but Byrne does a good job of never inundating the reader with too much obvious "book learnin'."

The other side of the equation, Simon Gurr as the artist, also holds up well. Even though the comic is in black & white, there's an assured confidence to the line work, something almost classical in a Rockwell sense to the proportions and compositions of the panels. There are many panels, with quite a lot of text scattered throughout, but despite that, Gurr manages the neat trick of keeping the line work playful and detailed even though he's squeezing a lot into limited space.

Perhaps most important of all, *Darwin: A Graphic Biography* manages to maintain a sense of fun. The tone is breezy, even if the material is not. And for parents with literate children, this is quite possibly the best way to introduce them to ideas and historical figures they might otherwise ignore. Adults who aren't intimately familiar with every aspect of Darwin's life can also learn a thing or two from this comic, and the overall presentation keeps things moving at a quick, lively pace. Educational comics may not be a big thing in the market, but if you're looking for one, this is a good example. CG

Batgirl Volume 1: The Darkest Reflection

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

Publisher: DC Comics **Released:** Feb. 12, 2013 **Price:** $17.99 CAD

85/100

Although it's been almost a year and a half since DC's New 52 relaunch started, I can still remember my thoughts surrounding the new Batgirl title at the time. Although I was and am a huge fan of Gail Simone's work on Barbara Gordon as a character, I was reticent about the idea of putting Barbara Gordon back into the Batgirl costume. For years, the character was one of the strongest female characters in comic books, a complete and total transformation into the Oracle character (who even got her own short-lived live-action television show *Birds of Prey*). Taking the character back to her roots, so to speak, felt like a misstep, or a step backwards, away from who the character had become over the intervening years.

With all that being said, Gail Simone was able to continue tapping into Barbara Gordon's strength, while still giving us a new, fresh take on the character. It would seem that in the New 52, Oracle didn't quite exist, or at least potentially didn't exist in the way in which fans had been accustomed, but after years sitting on the sidelines, she was subject to a miracle "cure", which is danced around throughout the first six issues of the new series, and which has allowed her to pick up where she left off, before The Joker ended her superhero career prematurely. This collection brings together *Batgirl #1-6*, which more or less comprises two short arcs. At times Bat-related books can have difficulty building a sense of continuity and supporting cast outside of the various cowled characters, but Simone does her best to flesh out the world Barbara lives in, giving her a nemesis on the Police Force, a long-missing mother who comes back into her life, a new roommate and friend who's surprising and perceptive, a complicated and nuanced relationship with both Nightwing and Batman, and a new villain which makes Barbara take stock of the fact that she's no longer confined to her wheelchair.

Gail Simone was really the only writer I could imagine being able to take Barbara Gordon out of the chair, and put a cowl back on her, and make sure that the character was still able to show growth from her time in the chair, and on the sidelines. She writes the character as someone recovering from a traumatic injury, and just because they have their ability to walk restored, it doesn't mean everything immediately goes back to normal. She struggles with guilt that she was cured, as well as getting back into fighting shape, even when she's still fairly rusty. It makes her character more interesting to read, because she's still struggling to get up to the mountain and overcome her physical and mental challenges that used to hold her back.

The artwork by Ardian Syaf is gorgeous, and the colourist who has been assigned to this book, Arreola, does a brilliant job with the colours. The images pop right off the page, the redesigned Batgirl costume is both practical and gorgeous at the same time. The covers for the issues in this volume were done by Adam Hughes, who really outdid himself with some really beautiful artwork.

Even if you're an arden fan of Barbara Gordon, you should be able to read this collection and really come around to the idea of Barbara Gordon as Batgirl again. Simone makes it feel like you're on a journey with Barbara, to rediscover herself as Batgirl, prove herself once more, and truly accept the twists of fate which not only put her in the wheelchair to begin with, but also eventually allowed her to get out of the chair, and become Batgirl once more. This is an immensely entertaining read all the way through. Highly Recommended! C&G

MADNESS OF WONDERLAND #1

REVIEW BY: Brittany Vincent

Publisher: Zenescope **Released**: Feb. 12, 2013 **Price**: $3.99 CAD

85/100

Having never ventured into the Zenescope series of dark wondrous fairy tales before, *Madness of Wonderland* took me by surprise. Amidst the *Wonderland* trilogy from the Grimm's Fairy Tales series comes *Madness of Wonderland* #1, a gritty look at the classic *Alice in Wonderland* story. In this Wonderland, the landscape is rife with killers and those who are not what they seem. Madness of Wonderland #1 from Dan Wickline and Jim Webb goes down the rabbit hole with more deliciously gory goodness, gorgeous characters, and a darkness not seen before in traditional Alice stories. This isn't your mother's Wonderland.

Zenescope's been building its horror-filled vision of Grimm's fairy tales for years now, and the *Call of Wonderland* was released to get new readers into the fold -- fairy tales with a decidedly Lovecraftian twist. The *Madness of Wonderland* issue opens with flower girls from Wonderland continuing to take more lives with their twisted methods of cannibalism. Calie and Violet, series frontrunners, are heavily featured in this tale of a downward spiral into madness -- particularly Violet, who's just not feeling like herself. In a bid to snap out of her funk she ends up meeting and socializing with a new friend who isn't all that she appears to be. The tension between the beautiful Calie and Violet begins to come to a head, while elsewhere in a nightmarish version of Wonderland the Red Queen is missing. The Temple of Purity is centre stage: the Red Queen and the Suicide King have reached their destination, but with the Queen of Spades following them, who knows what could happen?

Coming into the series having dabbled in the Wonderland saga from Zenescope had me at a definite disadvantage, but checking out the long and informative back story spanning several issues and narratives was a definite boon for me. The tale traces all the way back to a direct descendant of Alice Liddell (Charlie) who once escaped the bizarre Wonderland having saved an infant girl (Violet). It's the same wacky place you probably remember from the children's stories, only so much more messed up than ever before. The ladies are buxom babes, barely clothed. The vivid colour palette pops, and the insanity shines through in a manner that instantly grips you and keeps you fixated to see what's coming up next. Even as a newcomer to the twisted world of Wonderland, I found this issue to be quite the page-turner, inspiring me to seek out the rest of the many Grimm's Fairy Tale works, if only for more insight on how Wonderland got to the sorry state it's in. And what of all the crazy women running around everywhere?

Despite not being familiar with this skewed vision of Lewis Carroll's iconic imaginative playground, I found the *Madness of Wonderland* saga engaging, great-looking, and worthy of delving into further, which I recommend you do as well. This Wonderland is the deepest and darkest yet, and it's practically begging you to come in. CG

Send your letters to Letters@CGMagazine.ca to have them answered by our editorial staff.

Your *Ni no Kuni* review mentioned that the combat can be tricky. Do you think the game is really suited for gamers in the 10-13 range?

- Raina Paucar

Combat gradually rises in complexity, so the final iteration, while sophisticated, doesn't punch players in the face with too much information to absorb. Kids can pick up on things fast, and while there's definitely an element of high level strategy to the end game combat, I don't think it's the sort of thing that will confuse a dedicated 12 year old gamer of average intelligence, especially if they've played other RPGs in the past.

Of course, *Ni no Kuni* being a JRPG, there's also the old adage, "There's no monster so tough it can't be overcome by some grinding," so there's always that time honoured tradition to fall back on as well.

Where do you see RPGs heading into the next generation? Will JRPGs take back some of the market from WRPGs?

- JD Blosser

The way the current market is headed it seems like a contradiction in design concepts; RPGS are becoming less RPG-esque, while non-RPGs are becoming moreso. You just have to look at the streamlining of *Mass Effect 3* compared to the added feature set of *Borderlands 2* to see this dichotomy at work. If things keep going this way, the shooter and the RPG are going to be indistinguishable given enough time.

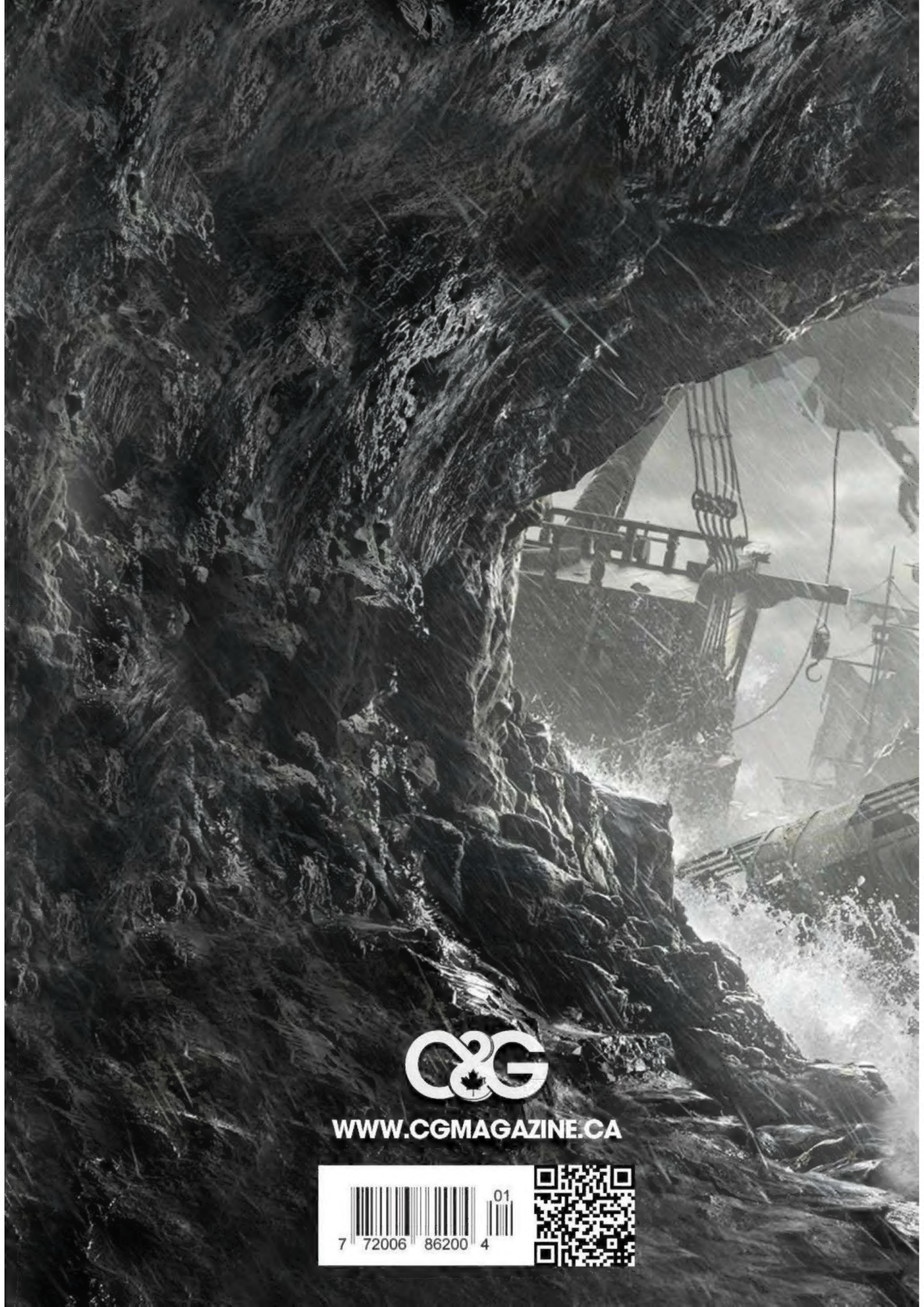
As for the JRPG, though it pains me a lot to say it since I'm a massive fan of that particular genre, there just doesn't seem to be any way for the Japanese RPG to ever take significant market share away from the Western variety. To be fair, the genre was always regarded as niche, and it was the anomaly of *Final Fantasy VII* that took it out of that niche. Now it looks like it's settled back into that marginal position.

How can the game industry show to the mainstream media that videogames aren't the reason for shootings, or for real world violence? Would the games industry even try?

- Sergio

Unfortunately, the simple, practical answer to this is; it can't. Games are a target right now in the media because they are new, the same as comic books, table-top RPGs and rap music were before. The only way that the media is going to move away from games is if a new target comes up that provides more viewership interest. The cynic in me is convinced that this next target is probably going to be a VR/Simulated Stimulation device of some sort, but that's really just a new kind of interface for gaming, so that doesn't actually solves the problem.

The media needs an easy scapegoat that the average viewer can hate and/or fear. Games fulfil that role; they are an easy, simple target to get heads around. Nothing the games industry says or does is going to change the media's mind. Comics tried and failed repeatedly to do this, and it was only when the media lost interest in comics—at least negatively—that they were finally allowed to flourish. Games, I suspect, will have to go the same route. C&G



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